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OR,

Major Hold-up Shows His Hand.

A Romance of the Twin Lodes of
Silverado.

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CHAPTER I.

JOLLY DICK BLUE.

"WAAL, bein' as it's you, pardner, don't keer ef I do."

One hand deftly managed the taut ribbons, while its mate took full possession of the silver-mounted flask, giving a friendly glance over the open nozzle before adding:

"Hyar's luck, in great gobs, stranger!"

"Drink hearty, friend," came the regulation

FIRST ONE AND THEN THE OTHER OF THE TWO MEN TOPPLED OVER, TEARING THE ROUNDS FROM THE HERCULES'S GRIP.

response from the one passenger who shared the box-seat with Jolly Dick Blue.

His own lips briefly touched the flask as it came back to him, and this compliment completed in due form, he added the capsheaf by producing a couple of cigars such as the stage-driver had not met with in many a long year.

His hands met with no resistance as they took possession of the lines while Richard Blue was striking a match and lighting his fragrant weed, and then Samuel Singleton, Sweepstakes Sam—the Silver Sport—knew that his conquest was complete.

"You've bin thar afore, pardner?" half-asserted, half-questioned the veteran, as he critically watched the double curve by which Sam avoided a loose rock and an ugly chuck-hole while crossing the hollow at a brisk trot.

"Merely as an amateur, my friend, although I've often thought I'd like nothing better than to turn stage-driver for a living.

"Which is right whar your thinker's ketched a soft spot, stranger," almost gruffly declared Blue as he resumed the ribbons and sharply touched up his leaders. "Time was when thar mought be both credit an' profit in toolin' a hearse, but them days is long gone by—wuss luck!"

"Too many road-agents, eh?"

"Road-agents—naw!" with a sniff of contempt. "What show hev they got in a silver kentry, whar it takes a pack-mule to tote 'nough pay fer a night's grub an' lodgin'? An' whar a man travels with two or three bits o' paper, 'stead o' hev'n' his kicks crammed full o' yaller?"

"Still, the race is not quite extinct, I believe? There have been one or two cases of highway robbery committed in this section, haven't there?"

"Major Hold-up—yas," admitted Blue. "His gang blocked me off one time last month, but they never made 'nough to pay fer the w'ar an' 'tar of loud talk an' cuss-words. No treasure-box, no registered mail, no nothin'!"

"Indeed? Yet I was under the impression that Silverado was one of the most flourishing towns in all this region!"

Jolly Dick cast a quick glance into that comely face at his shoulder, then caught a horsefly with his silken cracker just as it was in the act of settling down upon the neck of the off-leader for a feast.

Scarcely a hair was ruffled by that wonderfully dexterous stroke, but the plaited silk snapped viciously, and the double span sprung ahead at extra speed for a few moments, thus affording Dick Blue cover for a little rapid reflection.

"Jolly Dick" Blue he was called, but if that title was not a satirical misnomer, then its appositeness had long since disappeared, leaving the stage-driver a living emblem of saturnine gravity.

Every line of his weather-beaten visage spoke of natural melancholy, of blasted hopes and unfulfilled aspirations. Each line and wrinkle showed a downward tendency. His eyes were planted askant, being distinctly lower at the outer corners, while his grizzled mustache hung limp and spiritless over his thin-lipped mouth.

So well was his dejection known to all who were at all familiar with his portion of the route, that Jolly Dick generally had the box to himself, but occasionally a stranger would secure an outside seat, just as had happened this day with the handsome young fellow who introduced himself as Sam Singleton, "just dropped in from Sweepstakes!"

Little by little that grim gravity was melted away by the gay, careless spirits of the stranger, until now, after an evident struggle with himself, Dick Blue squarely faced his passenger, saying:

"Ef that's whar ye 'low to stop, stranger, change the mind o' ye jest as sudden as the wind that blows! Take the fu'st hearse out o' Silverado, an' ef thar hain't none gwine the way ye likes best, jest pick up yer hoofs in the paw o' ye, an' rack out—lively!"

"You talk as though you meant it all, too!"

"Why wouldn't I, then, pardner? You've treated me white, an' so I say it all over ag'in: don't think o' stoppin' over in Silverado, onless you're ready fer to take sides with the Sure Thing, or else the Daisy Belle. An' ef ye do 'lect eyther one, you'll wish ye hedn't afore the circus is over. Which is gospel truth ef Dick Blue does say it by his lonesome self, now!"

"Sure Thing, and Daisy Belle, eh? They sound like mining titles, and you think—what's the matter with my standing neutral, though?"

"Nothin', ef ye could, but ye won't be let. An' so I'm tellin' of ye, hard: hold yer breath while you've got to stop over in Silverado, an' rack out o' that jest as sudden as ye kin fetch it that way."

"You're not deeply in love with the town, then, I fancy?"

"Oh, the town's all right, but durn the people!"

"How so?"

Jolly Dick flashed another keen glance into that handsome face with its innocent looking brown eyes, then stared straight between the heads of his leaders as he slowly spoke again:

"It's a dandy town, is Silverado, an' ye might hunt an' prospect the silver kentry through from eend to eend without hittin' on nary 'nother as kin hold a can'le to her. But—an' that 'minds me!"

"Once thar was a stranger travelin' a-hoss-back through a strange kentry to him, an' long-come-shortly he hit a fork in the road, whar they wasn't nothin' n'r nobody to tell him which was the right track fer him to take; an' thar was black an' stormy night a-comin' on!"

"While the stranger was a-tryin' his level fer to puzzle it out, a man-critter come out o' the bresh, an' he jest up an' axed him which was the road he wanted to take.

"Don't make a diff o' bitterness, stranger, fer they both lead to the same place," was what the feller said. "Take ary one ye choose, but afore ye git thar, ye'll wish't ye'd done tuck t'other 'ne?"

Jolly Dick pointed his little allegory with a grim nod, then turned again to his team, leaving Mr. Singleton to digest his meaning as best he could.

This was by no means Sweepstakes Sam's first venture into the mining-regions, and his lively imagination found little difficulty in catching a clue from the words already let drop. Still, there was nothing like making each step sure as he went along, and so he spoke again:

"Some sort of a claim war, is it, my friend?"

"That's what!" with another sidelong glance into the face which even his jaundiced eyes found so agreeable just then. "Jest skirmishin' so fur, but the band'll git to playin' in red-hot airnest afore many more days rolls by. An' then—stan' from under all who kin!"

"But, surely, a stranger—"

"You're a man, hain't ye? You kin stop a bullet, or hit a lick back, I reckon? Waal, right thar ye hev it, then! You won't hev yer nose fa'rly inside the city limits afore one side or t'other, or all two both, fer that matter, 'll be tryin' to git ye to j'ine in on thar side o' the row."

"What's the matter with me standing strictly neutral, though?"

"Ye won't be let, an' ef ye was, it'd be pritty much like a cat in Tophet 'thout claws! No, sir! Afore you've bed time to turn around, or to stretch the kinks out o' your legs both sides 'll be at ye fer to favor them, an' right thar ye'll ketch it, red-hot an' still a-heatin'!"

"The factions'll fight over ye like tomcats over a fish-head, until ye take up with one or t'other side, then the other half'll turn to an' clapperclaw you no eend!"

"An' so I'm dealin' off the keerds to ye straight as a string, pardner. An' so I'm 'visin' of ye to jump the durn town jest as sudden as the law 'lows ye. An' so I tell ye, hard, strike out fer some other locate, whar a man kin be somethin' like a man, an' not a dug-gun burro fer to be kicked an' cuffed an' punched an' tail-twisted this side or that, an' never a ax which one likes ye best!"

Dick Blue wound up with a vicious slash of his long whip which sent his team plunging forward up the slope at an unusual pace, although untouched by the whistling lash.

His manner, more than his words, brought a shade of seriousness into that comely countenance, and for several minutes the passenger sat in silence, ruminating over the matter.

He was by no means a man to take alarm at trifles, but past experience was not wanting to remind him of how serious an affair a mining dispute can become, and just at present he had unusually powerful reasons for avoiding anything savoring of a factional fight.

He stole a covert look into the driver's face. That looked even more than ordinarily sour and forbidding, but Samuel Singleton was no mean judge of human nature, and he felt fairly assured that Dick Blue had taken a strong fancy to himself.

In silence still, he removed the screw-top to his pocket-flask, and held the nozzle where a scent of its aromatic contents could reach those thin nostrils, a twinkling light in his brown eyes as the stage-driver glanced half-reproachfully his way.

Only for a brief interval; then the silent bribe was accepted, and a curt nod gave the Silver Sport from Sweepstakes permission to proceed with his questions if it so pleased his mood.

"I can't well turn back now if I wanted to, but from your description I hardly think I'd fancy Silverado as a permanent location. Still, there's nothing like making the best of a bad bargain, and so long as I keep quietly in the middle of the road—"

"Which ye won't be let do it, though?"

"Then what's the matter with following a good example? You're too smart to take the losing side, and when I learn whose banner you march under—"

Sam cut himself short as Dick Blue broke into a dry, chuckling laugh, but before he could ask the intended question, the driver volunteered the information:

"Lord love ye, man, I'm the only critter in the bull town as kin keep straddle of the fence, don't ye know? I'm nyther bull-meat n'r terrapin."

"A neutral, you mean?"

"That's what!"

"If one, why not two? Share your secret with me, pardner, and maybe I can make it worth your while. What say?"

"It's a secret that ary critter in town kin tell ye fer nothin', stranger, an' I hain't a-chargin' of ye fer wu'thless goods. Time was when all two both gangs was mighty keen fer to rope me in, but what'd the old man say an' do?"

"Jest up an' told 'em to quit thar blatherin' or I'd up an' jump me job. Jest told 'em ef I was fo'ced to j'ine eyther one o' the two sides, I'd git on a blind drunk an' turn all things loose the very fu'st time I ever ketched eyther one o' the bosses comin' over the road in me hearse."

"And that threat won you immunity?"

"Waal, I reckon, takin' it you mean as how the critters let up on tryin' to coax or to skeer me into takin' sides. An' when we come to the head o' the Flume, which'll be pritty soon, now, you kin see jest how much a tipsy runaway'd be apt fer to cost them as mought be takin' passage in the hearse on that sort o' trip!"

Jolly Dick chuckled grimly at the reminiscence, then added:

"They wasn't ary other critter in town as they could trust to take the job, as would fill the persish, an' so I won my liberty—see? Not that thar hain't any drawbacks, fer they is; an' great gobs of 'em, too! But, one thing," his tones lowering as he leaned a bit closer to that attentive listener.

"It shows that they kin trust the old man, ur he wouldn't be a inside freight to go down the Flume—see?"

"One of the bosses, you mean?"

"Jest so. Herman Gillespie. Owns the Sure Thing. Sticks out all over him, ef ye tuck notice?"

"The tall, rather portly gentleman, you mean?"

Jolly Dick gave an emphatic nod, then squared himself on the box and straightened the lines between his fingers, giving a gentle cluck to his team as they breasted a sharper ascent than usual.

"Called the turn fu'st clatter, pardner. That's Herman Gillespie, the boss of the Sure Thing Mine. The Daisy Belle b'ongs to Abner Howland, an' his boy Jasper. Good, clean, squar' gents the lot of 'em, ef 'twasn't fer the fact that—Stiddy, boys!"

The final steep ascent had been conquered while Dick Blue was talking, and now the spirited team swept rapidly around a sharp curve in the stage-road, bringing the Man from Sweepstakes to his first glimpse of the portion locally known as "The Flume."

Only the beginning was visible as yet, but that was amply sufficient to explain a certain portion of the communication let fall by Jolly Dick Blue.

On the left of the narrow trail rose a rugged rock wall formed by nature, sloping back as it grew in height, yet so steep as to be almost proof against scaling by even the most expert mountaineer.

On the other hand yawned an abyss, narrow at its beginning, but rapidly increasing in both width and depth as one proceeded.

At intervals along that sharp descent portions of the rock wall had been blasted away, making niches where ascending and descending teams or trains might pass each other by in comparative safety; but for the most part the road-bed was barely wide enough for a single team.

Jolly Dick gave his passenger the reins to hold while he prepared for the descent, jumping to the ground and taking a couple of iron "shoe-and-chains" from the baggage-rack at the rear of the coach.

These he deftly adjusted to the rear wheels, a forward step of the team causing the wheels to roll upon the narrow, trough-like drags, thus confining the rear of the stage to a sledge-like motion, far more effectively locking the wheels than could be done by means of the brake alone.

"Everything in order, driver?" asked a deep, mellow voice as a face showed itself at the window in the stage door.

"Right as right, boss," was the prompt reply, then Jolly Dick nimbly mounted to the box and resumed possession of the ribbons. "All sot, an' hyar we go!"

The team started ahead, with pricked ears and lowered noses, plainly understanding that the most perilous portion of their trip was now at hand, and while keeping upon the keen alert, bearing his weight upon the foot-rest of the brake-handle, Blue muttered:

"That's the Sure Thing boss, pardner, an' ef 'twasn't fer the bar' looks o' the thing, an' dread o' what fun t'other gang'd make o' him over it, I'm bettin' big dollars to twenty cents that old Gillespie'd a mighty sight sooner take it foot-back down the Flume than to ride in the hearse—that's what!"

Sam Singleton cast a glance over the edge of the unguarded trail, then drily observed:

"I'll never blame him for feeling that way, for one! What do you reckon would happen to the outfit if a shoe should fail, or the harness play out?"

"Heaven or hell, jest a'cordin'," came the dry response. "Don't try to chin. I've got my han's full jest now."

Singleton thereafter was silent, and not another word was spoken until the descent was rather more than one third completed; then a sharp cry of warning broke from his paling lips.

CHAPTER II.

GOING DOWN THE FLUME.

ALTHOUGH he was sitting on the side furthest away from the abyss, Sweepstakes Sam found it anything but comforting to gaze into that dizzy depth, and mainly for this reason his eyes had turned toward the hill of rocks sloping abruptly back and upward.

The stage was rapidly descending the stiff grade, with Jolly Dick Blue bearing his weight upon the brake and holding his double span of horses well under control with the lines.

Just ahead of them was one of the places where the trail had been widened for the safety of passing teams, and from this niche a sort of natural trough ran upward almost to the crest of the rocky ridge.

The gaze of the Silver Sport naturally followed this trough as his eyes rested upon it, and there, high up the slope, where a growth of stunted shrubs and dwarfed trees had taken root, he sighted something which drew forth a sharp cry of angry warning from his lips:

"Look! The rock! It's starting to— Holy smoke!"

Even as the first words passed his lips, a huge boulder, half hidden by the scrubby growth, took a start, toppling over with an ominous groan and crushing sound starting a score of smaller fragments from their resting-places and sending them ahead as a warning of what was to follow.

Then, after that first sluggish movement, the mass seemed to awake to life and fury, giving a mighty leap, and filling the hills with booming echoes as it rolled down that natural channel, heading almost direct for the stage!

Jolly Dick uttered a horse oath and mechanically flung his weight upon the lines throwing his leaders into confusion and jerking them back upon the wheelers, whom the weight of the vehicle was forcing onward all the time, despite the double brake and lock.

It was not so strange that even a veteran driver should lose his head for the instant in the presence of such terrible danger, but Sam from Sweepstakes snatched the whip away from that momentarily paralyzed hand, striking the horses a couple of swift cuts as he cried aloud:

"On, you idiot! Give 'em rein, or— Look out!"

The team sprang forward under the lash, almost jerking the driver from his seat, but that brief delay promised to prove fatal to the travelers, for, even so soon stones and fragments of crushed rock sent in advance of that terrible missile were leaping over the road-wall and clattering upon the beaten trail or thumping against stage and horses.

Sam had caught sight of something more than the toppling rock in those brief seconds, but, that was no time for words, with their very lives hanging in the balance.

Even as the horses leaped forward under his fierce cuts the Silver Sport saw that oncoming mass strike a small boulder lying in its path, shattering it to bits, and sending one heavy fragment flying ahead in parabolic curve.

He saw the peril, and gave that swift cry of warning, but too late to do any good, so far as voluntary action on the part of Jolly Dick was concerned.

Singleton made a swift grab at the driver, thinking to jerk him back and so save the head toward which that fragment was flying direct, but, just as his fingers closed upon Blue's shoulder, one of the leading span was struck by a stone on a foreleg, causing the frightened animal to stumble and almost fall outright, this casting the other horses into confusion just at the most critical instant.

A cry of angry affright burst from the inside passengers who had just discovered that something was going wrong, and realizing that instant action alone could save them from being crushed to pomace under that loosened mass, or being swept to no less certain death on the rocks scores of feet below the trail, Singleton jerked the driver back, then plied the whip with savage force.

He was almost flung from the box by that sudden plunge, but then a shower of stones and dirt and other debris swept over them like a cataract, and one wildly-beating arm of the driver smote him across the face.

Instinct rather than reason told Sam what had happened—that the driver had been hard hit; and, half-blinded though he was, he caught poor Blue with one hand to save him from falling, while with the other he made a grab for the lines, even then cool enough to know that these lost control of, their lives would be lost as well.

At that same instant the terrible crashing sound grew louder; then came a heavy shock—so heavy that even the steel-nerved sport gave a cry of affright, for he thought the whole outfit was being crushed out of shape beneath that mighty boulder!

Fortunately that blind clutch secured the

reins, and hanging to them despite the mad plunging of the terrified horses, Sam flung one leg over the limp form of the sinking driver, knocked senseless by that flying stone. Recovering his balance as the stage bounded forward, Singleton twisted his face over a shoulder to partially clear his eyes of dirt and dust by a hasty rub, then took in the situation at one swift glance.

The huge mass of flying rock had struck the rear corner of the stage, crushing it in as though made of paper, then carried away the baggage rack behind.

But, worst of all, the wheels had been knocked out of the iron shoes, and already the horses were pushed to a rapid trot by the weight of the stage bearing against the hold-back chains.

The first thing Sam saw was how dangerously near the unguarded verge of the precipice the stage was now running, having been knocked half out of the road by that glancing blow, and as he tightened up the reins, calling both hands into play, his first effort was given to lessening their danger of toppling over into the abyss.

All this had transpired so quickly that the horses had not yet passed entirely beyond control, for they obeyed that strong pull, and the stage once more ran along the regular tracks.

Even yet all might have been well, had the Man from Sweepstakes been able to reach the brake with his nearest foot in those first moments following the fall of the huge boulder, but the body of the slain or senseless driver seriously hampered any movement on his part, and to free himself sufficiently to reach the brake by shifting his position on the box-seat, would almost surely end in casting the luckless fellow from his insecure perch, to be crushed beneath those bounding wheels, if not hurled over the escarpment itself.

Swift as a flash all this was taken in by the Silver Sport, and for the moment he did not venture the double risk, but contented himself with steadying the team, trying not only to hold them under control, but to make their weight gradually check the speed of the stage, which with each passing moment was growing more and more risky.

From the inside came loud and confused cries, but the driver paid no attention to them, just then, beyond mentally hoping that none of the terrified pilgrims would open the door and attempt to save life by jumping out: that would be almost equivalent to committing suicide.

"Steady, lad!" sharply yet soothingly cried the Sport, glancing ahead to where the road made a bend around a shoulder of hill, losing itself to sight and leaving the stranger to guess what fresh difficulties might be lying there unseen, as yet. "Steady-y-y, now!"

He had time for no more. The horses were forced into a gallop by the vehicle pushing upon them at momentarily-increasing speed. The wheels passed from a rattle to a swift rumble, the body swaying and rocking like a small boat exposed to cross-waves, and as they neared the perilous curve, Sam Singleton leaned far over toward the rock wall, hugging it as close with the inner wheels as he dared, fearing an upset when the point was to be taken at such a dangerous speed.

An ominous shiver ran through the entire structure as the wheels slid gratingly over the travel-worn stones, and the amateur driver instinctively gathered his sinews for a flying leap in case the worst must come; a leap which even a brave man might well have been excused for taking as the coach swung over, running on two wheels, while their mates on the opposite side spun swiftly through the air without other support.

But to leap meant more than peril to himself; it meant certain destruction to all those inside the coach; and fully realizing this, Singleton stuck to his post through all.

In another second the turn was completed, and the stage once more ran on four wheels, though now going at a pace which threatened to over-run the snorting wheelers.

Sam from Sweepstakes drew a long breath of almost painful relief as he saw a clear stretch before him, the trail running almost straight from that point on, with the foot of the Flume already in sight.

Even as he saw this much, the Sport was shifting his feet, pushing the body of the driver further back on the footboard, and thus making a way for himself to reach the brake by slipping along the box-seat.

"Steady-y-y—lad!" he once more called forth as he succeeded in that effort, then bearing his weight upon the beam, fetching a harsh squeal from the tires as they partly slid over the stone road-bed.

Even with that assistance it was impossible for him to materially check the rate at which the stage was thundering down the Flume, and the utmost he could hope for was to prevent that pace from increasing to a fatal extent.

He dared not put any great strain upon the lines governing the lead span, for a single misstep, caused by a stumble, or by the wheelers striking the heels of their mates in front, would almost certainly end in a smash-up out of which few if any could hope to emerge alive.

Depending mainly, then, upon the wheelers

and the brake, Sam Singleton touched the leaders with the lash, letting them run at the end of the traces, only hoping that they might prove sufficiently nimble to keep out of the way, and swift enough not to be over-run by the rear span.

In a gentle curve the Flume reached the base of the ridge, but now a new source of peril presented itself to those keenly vigilant eyes.

A little river with high and rocky banks cut across the trail, spanned by a wooden bridge which was less than double the width of the stage itself, and which had no side-rails to guard a runaway or skittish team from going to destruction through running off one side or the other.

But that same look ahead showed the Sport a track branching off to the right, and though this could be traced by him only for a few rods, he saw recent wheel-marks leading over it, and instantly made up his mind to risk the unseen rather than attempt to cross the bridge with his nearly unmanageable team.

He had no time for a second thought, but swung the leaders into the side-shoot, giving a reckless yell as he touched them sharply with the silk, now bearing his entire weight upon the brake and the reins, rising clear of the seat as the stage gave a swaying lurch.

Right ahead lay another curve, and as he struck this, the steel-nerved Sam gave vent to another wild yell, for he caught sight of the sparkling water in advance, and saw the road go abruptly over a bank, plainly leading to a ford and watering place!

"Go it, ye cripples! Hurrah for our side! Whoop-up, Eliza Jane!"

Down the steep slope the stage plunged, its wheels casting upward a blinding shower of sand which followed them even after the leaders were splashing through the shallow waters of the little river.

It was a wild and reckless ride, but the Sport from Sweepstakes saw safety ahead, and knew that he was acting all for the best. It would be impossible to check the runaways all at once, but as the leaders leaped from water to the deep and dry sand, breasting a long and steep slope on the further side of the river, he felt that the end was near at hand.

Adding his weight to both brake and lines, Sam had the team well in hand by the time that long and heavy slope was surmounted, and deftly swinging them out of the sandy ruts upon the grassy level, he reined up with a sharp cry to the passengers inside:

"Tumble out o' that, some of you fellows, and play hostler for a bit while I— Steady, boys!"

That call was hardly necessary, for the doors on both sides were already being flung open, and white-faced pilgrims were scrambling in haste to touch *terra firma* after their terrifying race with grim death.

Sam paid no particular attention to any of them, just then, for his first duty was owing to luckless Dick Blue, whose face was little better than a mask of blood, and who only showed signs of life by a gasping groan as the Silver Sport caught hold of his person.

"Lend a hand here, will you?" sharply demanded Singleton. "Help lower him to the ground, and the rest of you watch the team—so!"

Jolly Dick Blue was taken from his cramped position on the box-seat and placed upon the grass. The Sport from Sweepstakes ordered one of the passengers to fetch water from the river, then fell to summing up the hurts received by the driver.

"Ugly enough to look at, but no bones broken," came his decision after those injuries were cleansed from the horse-bucket. "He'll need to take a lay-off for a trip or two, but inside a week he'll be better than ever. Eh, pardner?" as Blue opened his eyes and essayed to arise.

"Who done—down the Flume?" huskily asked Jolly Dick, staring around him with a dazed look. "Whar's—so-bo, beauties!"

His face lighted up at sight of his team, safe and sound, though fairly dripping with sweat from fright and that last sandy pull.

"We owe you thanks—more than thanks, my dear sir," said one whom Sam immediately recognized as Herman Gillespie, from the description given him by Jolly Dick Blue. "You saved our lives, and—"

"My own neck at the same time, don't forget," curtly interposed the Silver Sport, turning away without noticing that proffered hand. "He'll have to go inside for the rest of the trip, I reckon. Is there room without crowding you, gents?"

"He can have my seat, and I'll share the box with you, my good friend," quickly answered Gillespie.

The Sport instantly faced the speaker, running his keen eyes up and down that well-dressed, portly shape before coolly saying:

"Much obliged, Mr. Gillespie, but I'd rather not. For one thing, I'm fond of all the elbow-room I can get, and then I'm far from sure the honor of your company wouldn't be more than overbalanced by the extra risk I'd run by entering Silverado in your company."

"Pray, what am I to understand by that, sir?" with a frown.

"That I've never worn any man's collar, and just now I want to start in level, Mr. Gillespie," came the incisive retort.

CHAPTER III.

THE SURE THING MAGNATE.

A SLIGHT frown greeted this significant hint, but that was the only show of anger given by Mr. Gillespie, and even that might have been but the precursor of that brow-arching as his large black eyes roved quickly over the figure of the stranger to whose nerve they all owed so much.

"I am not quite certain," he began only to have his deliberate, almost pompous speech cut short by the other.

"All the easier to yield to my whim, then, isn't it?"

"But, you spoke of a collar—"

"For which my neck is wholly unfitted, my dear sir, and while a dead-sure thing is generally supposed to be mighty well worth freezing fast to at sight, just now I'd rather be excused."

That puzzled light faded out of the mining magnate's eyes, and he seemed for the first time to grasp the other's full meaning.

"Oh, you mean—but, my dear sir, I had not even once thought of enlisting you on behalf of the Sure Thing; but, since you have spoken of it, I'll gladly make it worth your while to—"

"All aboard, or get left!" cried Sweepstakes Sam, seeing that Jolly Dick Blue had been placed inside, and all else was ready for resuming their journey.

Nimble as a cat he sprang to the driver's perch, gathering up the ribbons and coiling the slack of his long lash around the whip-stalk with a purely professional twist of the wrist.

"All aboard! Time, tide, and this hearse waits for no man! Schedule to keep, and less than half time to make it up in! Shall I tell 'em you are coming, Mr. Gillespie, or—Steady, lads!"

The wheelers were tightening the tugs, the leaders were swinging around toward the deserted road, and seeing that he was on the point of being left behind despite his generally respected authority, Herman Gillespie made a hasty dive for the stage-door, entering the vehicle just as it got in motion.

The Sport gave a silent chuckle as he took note of that abandoned pomposity, as he saw fit to term the dignity which seemed second nature to the Sure Thing magnate.

"Sweating under the collar, or I'll swallow my guess!" he told himself as he guided the team around a little clump of shrubbery, then into the regular road as it made a broad sweep after crossing the unprotected bridge. "All right, my covey! Better a bluff than taking the bait as a gudgeon, and if it wasn't to make the town think I wore his collar, why offer to swap seats with the driver?"

Right or wrong, this was the belief entertained by the Silver Sport from the moment Herman Gillespie spoke his first word to him, and the strongest protests to the contrary would not have convinced him of his error.

Herman Gillespie was a fine looking gentleman, take whatever view one might, and what in one of less natural dignity might have been termed fatness, in him was nothing worse than a becoming portliness.

His large face was composed of features sufficiently regular to satisfy the most critical, without a suggestion of effeminacy; its most serious fault being a dignity which those who liked him not could with some plausibility, term hauteur, or "stuck-up-ativeness."

This was the impression taken by Sam from that brief encounter near the river, and his prejudice hardly grew less strong as the warnings given by Jolly Dick Blue came back across his brain while he was driving toward the now not distant town.

Drawing clear of the fringe of timber with which the little river was bordered, the driver caught his first glimpse of Silverado, giving a sharp yet low ejaculation as his eyes took hasty notes.

Not that there was much of anything to see, as yet, for Silverado was but an ordinary type of the flourishing mining-towns which have not as yet attained the sober dignity of cities, and still retain all the surface rudeness of a "new camp."

Then, too, but a partial view could be obtained by one approaching town from that side, until fairly at the edge of the place.

But this was not what caused the eyes of the Silver Sport to glisten and his cheeks to flush a bit brighter than usual. He was there to keep an important engagement, the precise meaning of which he could only guess at as yet.

"Walk along, my dandies!" Singleton muttered, touching up the team, now quiet enough after their wild runaway down the Flume. "There's the town, and this is the day! I'm on hand; but, will he be as prompt?"

The whiplash cracked inspiritingly, and the double span broke into a rapid trot as they reached the outskirts of Silverado, the Man from

Sweepstakes giving them the keen hint to travel, then slightly slackening the reins and permitting them to pick their own course for the remainder of the route, shrewdly suspecting that the intelligent animals would show signs of halting at their regular station, even if they did not pull up without help.

In this he was right, for as the stage rumbled through the busiest portion of the town, its dilapidated appearance calling forth many cries of wondering interest from the curious citizens, the stage turned from the middle of the wide main street as it drew near the building which served as post-office, Express-office, and half a dozen other purposes.

This was hints efficient for Sam, who was on the alert for just that sort of a clue, and resuming full possession he drew up alongside the wooden platform with a grand flourish, doing the act in true "Overland style."

"Right side up, if not exactly with care and in perfect order!" he called forth lightly, as a waiting groom sprang out to take charge of the teams. "Treat 'em right royally, Johnny Brush-and-comb, for they've earned a double ration this trip, if ever four-legged animals did!"

In a town like Silverado everybody knows everybody else, and their business as well, hence it could not be expected that a change of stage-driver would pass without comment, even had not the vehicle itself shown such plain signs of having passed through some extraordinary trouble.

A crowd was rapidly gathering, and already half a dozen voices were asking for Jolly Dick Blue, while twice that number were no less eagerly asking the emerging passengers what had taken place on the road.

Herman Gillespie was the first passenger to step out of the stage, but he paid no attention to those curious ones, his black eyes brightening visibly as they caught sight of a trim, daintily-clad figure which was just then hurrying toward him.

Sam Singleton caught sight of that same figure, and instantly his manner underwent a change. He dropped his reckless assumption of the traditional "gallus" driver, and dropping to the ground on the outer side of the stage, passed around far enough to be an eye-witness of that meeting between father and daughter, for that such was the relation between the twain, it needed only a single glance to convince the Silver Sport.

Not only was there a general resemblance between the two, such as can rarely be found save between members of the same family, but their manner of greeting in public was surely that of father and daughter, neither of whom was ashamed of betraying the ardent affection they felt for each other.

The lady was young, hardly out of her teens, to give a guess in passing, and beautiful enough to do full credit to even that tall, portly, handsome gentleman.

Like Herman Gillespie she was dark of complexion, yet with the pure, soft flush of perfect health, and Sam felt a touch of envy as he saw her arms embrace Herman Gillespie, and her full red lips touch his clean-shaven mouth.

In that instant his resolution was formed, and what he would have denied the father, was granted the daughter!

Stepping briskly forward, he gently tapped the mine-owner on an arm, lifting his hat as Gillespie turned his way with an expression of surprise coming into his face as he recognized the stranger who had so rudely rebuffed him only a few minutes before.

"Your pardon, Mr. Gillespie," hurriedly muttered the Silver Sport in tones barely loud enough for those ears. "I couldn't let you go in ignorance of the fact that our recent experience was something more than an accident."

"Something more? What am I to understand by that, sir?"

"I give you the facts, and you must draw your own inference from them. That rock was started on purpose to wreck the stage, Mr. Gillespie," earnestly replied the stranger. "I've said nothing about it to others, but I'm ready to make oath that I sighted at least one fellow right back of where that rock was resting when it was set in motion."

That massive face flushed hotly for a moment, then turned paler than usual. His eyes caught a curiously red tinge, and swept warningly around before their owner hastily whispered:

"You saw a man there? Can you swear to his face? Would you recognize his figure, think?"

But, even for the sake of that fair face, the owner of which was so wonderingly watching them, Sweepstakes Sam was not ready to say so much, and instead of replying as wished, he merely muttered:

"That's going a bit too far, sir. Only be on guard! I hardly think the rock was set in motion by any of your friends, though!"

With those words the Sport turned and rapidly forced a passage for himself through the eagerly listening crowd, losing himself pretty much as he intended should be the case, yet not so quickly but that the Sure Thing magnate could set a spy upon his track.

Turning to a shabbily dressed man of middle age who stood close by, Herman Gillespie pointed out the Man from Sweepstakes, whispering:

"Follow him and learn all you can. See where he puts up for the night, and whom he talks in confidence with. Go! and make no failure."

The shabbily garbed fellow hurried off without a word, striking the scent on the instant, and sticking to it like grim death.

Gillespie took his daughter's arm and moved off toward their home, almost rudely checking her eager questions as to what had happened.

But, the shocked, aggrieved look which came into the fair face of Louise Gillespie recalled him to his senses, and while on the way home he told of the accident, making as light of it as possible.

Naturally enough the daughter was greatly shocked at thoughts of the peril her parent had so narrowly escaped, and it was with a sense of actual relief that the Sure Thing magnate found his general manager, one Milton Muldraw, awaiting his arrival, with a face which seemed to hint at important tidings.

Excusing himself to Louise, and promising to tell her more of the adventure later on, Gillespie closed the door upon her, then turned to his manager with an inquiring look.

"Nothing new, sir," promptly answered Muldraw, without waiting for a plainer question. "They are pegging away at the Daisy Belle, though, and it's merely a matter of time when the band must begin to play."

"Well, we'll try to be on hand when the music strikes up, Milton."

"That goes without saying, but—may I speak out, sir?"

"Why not? What are we here for?"

"Then I'll say again, what I've said before, sir: why wait any longer? Why not strike the blow right off?"

Gillespie shook his head, his brows gathering in a frown before the words passed his lips:

"Words easily spoken, Muldraw, but when you come to take a second thought?"

"We've more to lose than to win by further delay, sir."

"I'm not so sure of that, either," a cold smile coming into his strong face just then. "Don't forget that it will be a bloody affair when it comes to fairly locking horns with the Daisy Belle outfit."

"Don't I know all that, sir?" with a touch of poorly disguised impatience in both face and voice. "It's just because of that knowledge that I am urging you to forestall the Howlands. Remember that it is the first blow that counts the most, Mr. Gillespie!"

"As a rule, but there are exceptions," with a return of his half-sneering smile. "For instance, I'm almost ready to make oath that Abner Howland dealt his first blow at me, this very day!"

"What? You surely can't mean it, sir?" ejaculated Muldraw, his bearded face catching a half-wolfish expression as he leaned a bit nearer his employer in his eagerness to learn more. "How was it? How could he strike at you, when he's been in town all day long?"

"Has he no other hands save those hung to his own body, man?" the Sure Thing magnate almost fiercely asked, then made his meaning clearer by briefly sketching the adventure at the Flume, ending by repeating the parting warning dropped in his ears by the stranger to whose nerve and skill they all owed their lives, under Heaven.

"Both Howland and his cub were in town, though," demurred Muldraw.

"But, not all of their tools, though! Fix this dastardly deed on the Howlands, and we'll have three-fourths of the town with us. Look to that, Muldraw. And, too, see if you can't enlist this stranger on our side."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DAISY BELLE OWNER.

HAVING delivered the warning which would hardly have been given so soon had Herman Gillespie not been met just then by his lovely daughter, Sweepstakes Sam hurried away in order to escape the questions which he knew were ready to be put, but which he hardly cared to answer without first taking more thought than he had as yet been able to give the odd affair.

He fully expected to be followed by the interested mine-owner, for more explicit information, and should such a move be made, he stood ready to foil it by actual flight; but as he glanced over a shoulder a bit later, he caught sight of Herman Gillespie moving away from the crowd which had so soon swelled to a considerable size, in company with his daughter.

"Bluffed off heap sight easier than I looked for," was the Silver Sport's mental comment, as he paused himself. "Because of the young lady, I reckon. Glory to Moses! Who'd expect to meet such a glorious beauty out in this benighted region, though!"

His admiring gaze followed that tall, queenly figure until a turn in their course shut off further view, and then, never once suspecting that a spy had been placed upon his track, Singleton moved nearer the stage whose rear end bore such eloquent testimony to the peril which had so narrowly missed claiming human lives.

The stage had been emptied of its passengers before this, and the story of that flying boulder and the thrilling ride down the Flume was being told by several pair of lips; but the Sport from Sweepstakes felt little interest in that part of the day's work now that all was over, and catching sight of the sorely battered driver, who was the center of an interested group of citizens, he pushed his way through their ranks with scant ceremony, saying in kindly tones:

"Come, come, pardner! This is no fitting place for you, my friend. You are worth a thousand dead men, of course, but that hurt of yours needs looking after, and the sooner the better, too!"

"An' right hyar you see the gent which—"

"Takes full possession of you, just like this," quickly interposed the Silver Sport, hardly in the humor for being lionized just then. "By right of first claim, if not of discovery, old man! And so—see you all later on, gentlemen, if needs must, but just now we're looking for a medicine-sharp!"

Without giving Jolly Dick Blue a chance to complete the introduction so earnestly begun, Sam hustled the injured driver out of the excited crowd, and away to a spot where they might exchange words without fear of being overheard or interrupted.

"Where can we find a doctor, or a surgeon, pardner?" were his first words, after that point was gained.

"What fer? You didn't ketch no hurt, boss?"

"No, but your head needs looking after, so—"

"Git out!" almost indignantly exploded the veteran, giving his battered caput a toss and a reckless shake. "I bain't hurt none to speak of, an' ef ye wasn't the solid friend you've proved yerself this same day, durned ef I wouldn't prove it to ye by takin' the measure of the back o' ye right hyar in the dust—so I would, now!"

Singleton laughed good-humoredly. This was hardly talk for a disabled man, and knowing that no bones had been broken by that flying fragment of rock, he was content to accept the sturdy driver's estimate of himself and his needs.

"All right if you feel that way, pardner. I've no great love for the pill-box gentry my own self. But—is it fair to ask where you hang out when you're off duty? Married man?"

"Not any fer me!" with a wry grimace which brought a smile to the face of the Man from Sweepstakes. "I puts up at the Blossom House, but that I don't reckon would suit the likes o' you."

"Why not, if it suits you, pardner?"

For answer Jolly Dick faced the Sport, throwing out his arms like one inviting critical inspection, then glancing over their strongly contrasting exteriors.

"That's why, boss, an' ye kin see it fer your own self."

"You're a man, and I'm nothing more than that same," came the easy response. "What's good enough for you, is plenty good enough for your friend, I reckon. Only—under which flag does the Blossom House sail, though?"

"Which?"

"Is it Sure Thing, or Daisy Belle, I mean?"

"Nyther one—nur t'other, please the pigs!" came the fervent answer. "An' that is one why I tuck to stoppin' thar, fer I'm growed plum' sick an' 'gusted with all this hyar scrambling an' scrougin' an'—"

"Good enough, and I'm a full-blown blossom from this minute!" the Silver Sport declared, with a heartiness little short of enthusiasm. "I don't fancy the mix any better than you do, from the little I've seen of it all, and I'd camp out with the sky for shelter rather than even seem to take sides by putting up at either a Sure Thing or a Daisy Belle house."

"Then you're lected fer the Blossom, sure enough!" declared Jolly Dick Blue, slipping a grimy paw through the Sport's arm and moving down the street, to turn the nearest corner. "That's the one place in town whar you kin ketch a bit o' chuck an' a bunk without brandin' of yerself one or t'other—dug-gun 'em all two both!"

While on the way to the "neutral hotel!" the friendly driver once more took occasion to warn his friend that efforts would certainly be made by both factions to win his adherence to their cause, and in return Sweepstakes Sam told Blue that the falling rock was no accident, but a carefully planned and dastardly attempt to wreck the stage.

"I leave you to judge what the object was, whether to wreck the stage for robbery, or to dispose of its passengers for some other reason; but either way, mind you don't let fall even a hint of what I'm telling you right now, until I give you permission to speak out through my mentioning the actual facts myself," was his earnest addition.

Jolly Dick was greatly shocked by this totally unexpected revelation, and for the first few moments could do little more than utter subdued execrations, and wondering ejaculations; but then he burst forth:

"Ef the hand o' the Daisy Belle hain't into it you kin call me a howlin' liar right from head-waters, an' I'll thank ye fer puttin' the right

brand onto me flank!" he cried, with risky loudness, considering the dangerous nature of that accusation.

"Think whatever you must, pardner, but don't let it break forth in plain speech," gravely warned the Silver Sport. "I only caught a passing glimpse of the dirty scoundrel, but I took his photograph in that second, and I'll know him again if ever he comes within eye-range."

"An' ef ye do find the whelp, boss?"

"Well, I'll decide that later on. Only, with him spotted, maybe it'll not be so difficult a matter to find out just who set up the little job, and what for. Understand?"

"Lord! ef I could jest hev the dirty houn'-dog to my own self fer ten minutes by the watch—wouldn't I, though?" vengefully muttered the excited driver, clinching his fists and grating his teeth. "Why, man, jest think of it! The cussed whelp mought 'a' smashed one or a couple o' them hosses!"

Despite his own strong feelings on that point, Singleton could not refrain from laughing at this truly characteristic view. Jolly Dick never once seemed to give thought to his own peril, or that of the other lives so treacherously endangered. His whole mind was given to the great risk run by the team he had driven for so long that they seemed like flesh and bone of his own body, rather than dumb beasts.

By this time the two men had come within sight of the Blossom House, but before they could fairly gain that refuge, Jolly Dick gave a start and a growl of disgust as he sighted a wiry, active figure hastening toward them, evidently with the purpose of speaking.

"Thar one of 'em comes now, dug-gun him!" growled the driver, sourly, indicating that person by a nod of his battered head.

"Nothing very formidable, so far as looks go," coolly criticised the Sport. "Who is it, pardner?"

"Owner of the Daisy Belle, Abner Howland," whispered Blue, as that briskly-moving personage came nearer, giving an off-hand nod which apparently included them both.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," said Howland, his wiry beard of a grizzled red hue bristling under a forced smile as his keen blue eyes ran swiftly over the trim, erect figure of the stranger in town. "Glad to see you able to navigate still, Jolly. And this is—eh?"

"Myself, nothing better, sir," returned Singleton, with a bow far too polite to be entirely sincere.

"You brought the stage into town, didn't you, sir?"

"Or the stage brought me, more properly speaking."

The Man from Sweepstakes was deliberately inspecting the owner of the Daisy Belle during this brief interchange of words. He took no pains to disguise his curiosity, for one thing caring precious little what sort of an impression his manner might make upon Abner Howland, and for another really interested in the person who held one-half of Silverado in the hollow of his hand.

On his part the owner of the Daisy Belle showed no irritation or uneasiness at this inspection, since his eyes were engaged after pretty much the same fashion.

He had lived long enough to recognize a true man when he saw one, and though one less experienced in the art of reading human nature might have passed the Silver Sport by as merely an average specimen, not so Abner Howland.

He had seen Sam at the stage, and took note of the fact that he moved away in company of Jolly Dick Blue, which gave him a definite idea of whither the stranger was bound.

Merely lingering long enough to learn of the heroic part played by the stranger in the Flume incident, he had hurried off by a shorter cut, thus intercepting the two newly formed friends as described.

"Let it go at that, then," he said, equably. "It amounts to pretty much the same thing in the end, I reckon. And now, I stand in need of a gentleman just about your size and dimensions. Name your price, and if not altogether out of reason, you're my man!"

Singleton arched his brows in seeming surprise at this blunt proposition, but then made answer by asking a question:

"For what purpose, pray, Mr. Howland?"

"You know me, then?" with just the hint of a frown as he flashed a glance toward Jolly Dick Blue.

"I know your name, yes; but is that knowing the man?"

"It's a starter, I reckon," with a grim smile coming into his weather-beaten visage. "But business first, if you please. You asked what I wanted of you, I believe?"

The Sport from Sweepstakes bowed assent, still maintaining that visual inspection.

"Well, the conditions won't be so mighty hard, I'm thinking, nor the work quite enough to break your back, the first day on, at any rate. I'll hire you at your own price, and you can do just what strikes your fancy the most agreeably. What say, sir?"

"Oh!" in mock surprise, his brows arching

once more. "Is that the way the articles are to run?"

"Just that way, sir. You will accept, then?"

"I didn't know but what you wanted to hire me to go into the stage wrecking business, you see," suggested Singleton, keenly watching the effect of those words.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" harshly demanded Howland, flushing hotly, but with anger alone, as the Sport was forced to admit.

He saw that he was on the wrong track, unless this man was a far better actor than he could give him credit for, and so smoothed over the break as best he might, laughing as he added:

"Merely trying to show you the possibilities which might lie back of a blind engagement, Mr. Howland. Suppose a complete stranger was to hire you, as you try to hire me, then spring some such nasty job on him all in a heap? Of course you wouldn't be guilty of such a trick, but the mere fact that such a thing might be, bars my blindly hiring out."

"Well, it's just like this, stranger. I'd a mighty sight sooner have you for a friend than an enemy, even if you decline to take an active part in whatever work may offer itself. Accept my offer, and you shall arrange all the rest to suit yourself. Can any man make a fairer offer than this?"

"The offer is all right, so far as that goes, but, at what figure do you hold the mining property called the Daisy Belle, Mr. Howland?"

"What has that got to do with it, man?" impatiently demanded Howland.

"Well, I merely asked its value, so I could decide whether or no to ask anything additional as a month's wages; but a man can never hope to win if he never bets! So, give me the Daisy Belle as wages, and I'll wear your collar for one month from date!"

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBLE WARNING DECLINED.

COOL as the proverbial cucumber, the Sport from Sweepstakes made this proposition in his turn, and really looked as though he had no doubts as to its instant acceptance.

Not so the mine-owner.

His face flushed until it was almost purple, and a danger light leaped into his small, keen eyes as they glared upon the audacious Man from Sweepstakes.

"Give you the Daisy Belle? Are you crazy, man?" cried Howland at length, in ill-disguised disgust.

"Not while the moon sits in this quarter, my good friend and would-be employer. Why, what is there so remarkable in all this? Didn't you bid me set my own price, sir?"

Sam spoke with a trace of respectful reproach which almost choked Jolly Dick Blue.

The stage-driver was keen-witted enough to see that this stranger from Sweepstakes was making sport of the other, and though he knew, too, that Abner Howland was a dangerous subject for such jests, he could not help feeling a bit elate that his newly formed friend should prove himself so abundantly able to take care of himself.

"Yes, but I added, anything in reason, while you—oh, come, my good friend, talk business, can't you?"

"That is precisely what I am doing, Mr. Howland. Make over the Daisy Belle to me, and after I've satisfied myself that you can convey a clear title, I'll put on your collar and bark to your order for one calendar month, beginning with to-morrow morning."

"But, that's rank nonsense, man alive!"

"Precisely what I thought when you made the proposition, Mr. Howland, but you insisted on my naming terms, and so—right there you have them, to accept or to decline, as best suits your convenience, sir."

"Leave out the Daisy Belle, and talk solid business, friend, and—"

"That is precisely what I am talking, Mr. Howland, although you seem unable to recognize the fact."

"But such a crazy offer, man!"

"Yours, or mine?" innocently asked the Silver Sport.

"Yours, of course, when you asked the Daisy as a month's wages for doing nothing but keeping hands off!"

Sam Singleton dropped his chaffing manner now, feeling that he had carried the matter far enough in that direction for once. In business-like tones he said:

"I named that price, Mr. Howland, merely to convince you that I am not for sale, nor are my services on hire. If you can manage to recognize this double fact, and accept it as such, we need waste no further breath on the subject."

That unusual flush had faded away from the fox-like visage of the Daisy Belle owner, but there were other and still more dangerous signs to be noticed therein, and Jolly Dick Blue gave the stranger in town a warning nip from under cover, as token to keep well on his guard.

That was hardly necessary, although Singleton appreciated it at its full value as a token of friendship.

He had already taken note of those contract-

ing pupils as Howland stared him full in the eyes, and he knew right well what emotion caused that thin nose to turn white and look so pinched near its tip.

There was a brief period of silence, then Howland broke it, sternly saying:

"You'll find it easier to do worse than better, stranger. For one thing, if you've joined in with the Sure Thing crowd—"

Singleton waited a few moments for the other to complete that sentence, but, as Howland did not say more, he spoke in his turn:

"Is there any law against my taking such a step, Mr. Howland?"

"Then you have signed with the Gillespie gang?"

Through pure love of mischief the Silver Sport was strongly tempted to play still further with this fiery-tempered fellow, but then his better judgment prevailed, and in more earnest tones he made answer:

"Without admitting your right to ask any such personal questions, sir, I'll say this much: I wear no man's collar but my own. I have not signed with the Gillespie gang, as you call it. I am not training with the Sure Thing crowd, any more than I'm whooping it up for the Daisy Belle."

That terrier-like face brightened perceptibly at this assurance from those mustached lips, and Howland lost no time in attempting to clear away whatever disagreeable impression he might have made.

"I'm mighty glad to hear that, sir, and I ask your pardon if I let the edge of my tongue cut a bit deeper than— Eh?"

"Nothing more than that I haven't quite finished what I set out to say," calmly rejoined the Sport as the mine-owner broke off in obedience to that imperious gesture. "Listen to me, please, and we'll try to make once saying answer for all time to come."

"This is the first time I ever struck your town, and business is what fetches me this trip. While that business is pending, I'll have neither time nor inclination to mix in with any purely local affairs, such as I understand this Daisy-Bell-Sure-Thing dispute to be."

"It's not a dispute, sir, but the fight of an honest man against a dastardly attempt to rob him in broad daylight!" fiercely averred Howland.

"That is from your point of view, of course?"

"If that means you think I'm lying—"

"It means nothing of the sort, Mr. Howland. I neither know nor care whether you are right or wrong, but every case has at least two sides to it, and no doubt if I was to ask Herman Gillespie his candid opinion concerning this little tempest in a teapot, he'd declare himself the sorely injured one, and you the atrocious sinner. Comprehend?"

"He wouldn't lack the gall to lay even such a lying claim—devil toast him for a greasy supper!" returned Howland, in hot disgust.

"Which goes to prove that I'm taking the correct view of the case, don't you see? You know you are in the right, Gillespie knows he is not wrong, but fighting wrong. And, between you both, I'll go bail you've got the town divided up into factions, each one of which stands ready to maul and clapperclaw the other at the drop of a hat."

Sam paused, with a questioning look, but while Howland smiled grimly, he said nothing. Possibly he began to suspect that this smooth-spoken stranger from Sweepstakes had induced him to say a bit too much, already.

"Granting all this, then, can't you see how I'm fixed? I haven't the spare time to study out the rights of this dispute, and I'm too much of a white man to relish going in on the dirty side. So I'm sitting on the fence, purely neutral, with lips puckered up to cheer the winner, taking chances on Heaven favoring the right!"

And the Sport from Sweepstakes waved a hand, smiling blandly into the terrier-face before him, to which came a grim smile in its turn before Howland replied:

"That's your position, then, and there's no hopes of our making a trade, stranger?"

"Never a hope, my dear sir."

"Well, then I've got mighty little more to say, but that little will weigh a ton if you give it a fair show. Better hurry over your business matters in Silverado, and return to Sweepstakes before the explosion comes."

"Am I to take that as a hint, or as a threat, Mr. Howland?"

"Whichever suits your taste best, stranger. I'm not a man who stops to peel the bark off his words before spitting them out, and so I tell you plainly: there can be no neutral in Silverado while this dispute bangs fire. Who is not for us, is against us. Who is not a friend in the open, is surely an enemy in the dark, and—well, that's hint enough for a hog. I take it!"

"I'll take your word so far, Mr. Howland, since I do not claim to be a porker," bowed Singleton, with cool insolence.

It was a risky step to take after all that had been said, perhaps, but Howland merely laughed at the veiled quip, and plainly thought no less of the stranger who dared make such against one of that town's powers.

"That's all right, stranger, but if I'm a hog, Jolly Dick, yonder, can tell you whether or no my grunt is worth heeding."

"If your grunt is to be taken as a threat, sir, I'll let it lie just as it has fallen. I haven't come to Silverado for the purpose of mixing in a row of any description. If I have my own way, there'll be none in which I can engage. But—and that begins with a big letter, observe:

"But, if any man or set of men take particular pains to tread on my toes, I'm really afraid I'll have to remonstrate against such a decided lack of politeness on their part. I really fear so, Mr. Howland."

Singleton spoke with a feigned meekness which caused Jolly Dick Blue to snicker outright, and brought another flush to the face of the Daisy Belle owner, who liked no better than another to be made a jest of.

But he, too, had his points to carry, and smothering his anger, he added:

"Well, I reckon enough wind has been spilt for once, and so, good-evening to you, sir! I'll see you later on, unless you conclude to take friendly advice, and skip out before morning comes."

Howland turned, without waiting for a reply or a retort, and again locking arms with the stage-driver, Sweepstakes Sam hastened to the Blossom House, where he was introduced to the landlord in due form by Jolly Dick Blue.

By this time the sun had set, and twilight was deepening rapidly over the valley in which Silverado was located.

Both men were hungry, and as supper was already on the table in the dingy, dimly lighted dining-room, few words passed between them until that meal was fully discussed.

There was no difficulty in securing a room for the stranger, for the "neutral hotel" was but poorly patronized since factional feeling had grown to fever heat, and it was only when they were up-stairs, with a door closed and locked behind them, that Jolly Dick Blue gave vent to his earnest feelings.

"It done me heap o' good, boss, jest to see how mighty neat ye plugged up that thar tank o' wind," his flattering commencement; "but, all the same, 'twas a mighty resky bit o' business!"

"Is he such a terrible creature, this human terrier, then?" asked the Silver Sport, with a lazy yawn distorting his handsome visage.

"That's no lie, neither, even ef ye did say it fer a joke," Blue gravely asserted. "Thar hain't a surer hand with a gun in seventeen States then that same Ab Howland, nor a p'zener critter in a rough-an' tumble fight, fer that matter. He hain't so much fer looks, but when it comes down to solid business, he's thar, an' thar to stick to the end!"

"Something like a singed cat, eh?"

"With full-grown claws, ye want to keep in mind, though, pardner. An' then, to make it all the more bindin', he's got away half the town to takin' his way o' lookin' at the muss, an' ef he was to jest wink his off eye in your direction—waal, look out!"

"So bad as all that?"

Jolly Dick gave an uneasy frown at this drawling question, for he could see the careless jest which lay beneath that surface of mock gravity, and it added to his friendly anxiety concerning this handsome fellow to whom his life was almost surely owing.

"You're laughin' at the idee, pardner, but it's meant in sober earnest, an' ef ye don't take mighty good heed, it'd be a safe bet to give odds that you'll fare all the wuss afore the end comes 'round. You're dead sot on stickin' it out, then?"

"Until I've finis'ed the business which brings me here from Sweepstakes, I'm a fixture in Silverado, Blue," soberly declared the Sport, losing all his real or feigned carelessness now that he saw how honestly uneasy this humble friend had become on his behalf. "It stands just as I told that fellow 'out yonder: I'll pick no row, nor mix myself up in one so long as I'm giv'n elbow room according to my needs. But if I'm crowded beyond comfort, then I'll act accordingly."

Despite his anxiety concerning the future of his new-found friend, Jolly Dick had for some little time been showing signs of weariness, partly due no doubt to the heavy blow his head had that day received, and Singleton soon left him to retire, passing over to his own chamber, where he remained but a few minutes.

Leaving both room and house, the Sport from Sweepstakes lit a cigar while taking a leisurely glance around him, noting the fact that Silverado seemed remarkably quiet for a town containing such explosive elements.

"Too mighty quiet for a healthy mining-town!" was his decision, yet showing no signs of beating a retreat. "Risky, perhaps, but what of that? This is the date, and now for findin' the place!"

Having settled the points of the compass to his satisfaction, Sam Singleton turned to the right, moving leisurely forward, yet keeping his wits well about him, and making good use of his eyes as he proceeded.

The night was an almost perfect one, the sky devoid of a single cloud, and the stars shining

brightly as though in emulation of the full moon, now visible above the hills lying east of Silverado.

Hardly a breath of air was stirring, yet that summer night was cool enough for comfort, and with a lightness almost equal to that of day, it was an easy matter for the Man from Sweepstakes to take ample notes of each house as he drew near them.

As already hinted, he had never visited Silverado before this day, and while he had an appointment to meet a friend in town, on that date, and had a description of the very spot where that meeting was to take place, he knew absolutely nothing concerning its precise location.

He was just blaming himself for being too cautious to ask Jolly Dick for the information which, no doubt, the driver was fully capable of giving him, when he noted a man rapidly approaching him.

Instantly he decided to ask for information of this person, but as the figure came nearer, his mind underwent as abrupt a change, and his right hand involuntarily clinched as a startling suspicion flashed over his brain.

Surely he had seen that shape before! And, as the fellow passed him Sam Singleton caught an imperfect view of his face, which so nearly confirmed his fancy that he wheeled the next instant for a fairer sight—to utter a sharp ejaculation of angry surprise as he saw the ruffian aiming a vicious blow at his head with a heavy club!

It was only a glimpse, for before he could do more than involuntarily flinch from that dastard assault, the club descended, and the Sport from Sweepstakes staggered back, to fall like one suddenly smitten by death!

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOT BY MOONLIGHT.

ALTHOUGH he disguised it fairly well, the elder Howland was an angry man when he parted with this imperturbable stranger whom he had vainly essayed to enlist under his banner in the bitter struggle which he, in common with nearly every other citizen of Silverado, felt must soon break forth in deadly earnest.

"Confound the fellow! Ask the Daisy Belle for one month's wages? Why didn't he ask for the moon and half a dozen stars, while he was about it? I'd give 'em just as quick, and he knew as much, too!"

That was one of the points which rankled the most keenly, and now that he was beyond range of those cool brown eyes, Abner Howland took no pains to mask that fact.

Naturally enough under the circumstances, he believed now that his hated rival, Herman Gillespie, had been beforehand with him in securing this desirable recruit, even if he had not imported him for the occasion.

"It's long odds he's done just that—curse him for a greasy, fat, old fraud!" venomously muttered the Daisy Belle owner, as he walked moodily onward, having no particular destination in view now that his suddenly conceived mission had proved to be an utter failure. "If so, of course the young fellow would lie about it, rather than come out flat-footed; and yet—he didn't seem just that sort, either."

This was an involuntary concession to honesty, but it only made the mine-owner less satisfied with himself, and more angry at the stranger for having caused that chagrin.

True, this was only one man, but unless appearances lied, the new-comer was something beyond the ordinary, and with the two factions so evenly balanced, even a single bold player might serve to turn the scales for or against.

The sound of rapid steps caused Abner Howland to lift his eyes at that moment, and his harsh features seemed to soften as he recognized his son approaching him.

If one soft, kindly spot remained in the mine-owner's composition, right there it might be found. He loved this son, and was not ashamed to show as much, after his rough, off-hand fashion.

There was a look of trouble upon the more than comely face of Jasper Howland as he joined his father, and his first words touched upon the subject which gave birth to that look.

"You've heard what they're hinting around, father?" was his salutation. "You've caught that cowardly rumor, then?"

"What is it, Jap?"

"About the stage, this evening, of course."

"What about the stage, lad?"

"Then you haven't heard, after all? The cowardly hounds! I've tried to pin it down to any one man, but failed; not one has the gall to father such an infernal lie! And yet they keep on scattering their vile hints against us, like—"

The young man broke off abruptly as a hand gripped his arm, and the mine-owner almost harshly demanded:

"What is it now, Jasper? Out with it, son! Of course it starts at Gillespie's door, though—curse him!"

"I can't think just that way, sir, but there's an ugly rumor set afloat that it was not an accident, but a deliberate attempt to wreck the—"

stage, to-day! And that because Mr. Gillespie was aboard of her!"

The elder man started at this speech, but in place of the angry explosion which Jasper naturally expected to come, his father turned his face aside, maintaining silence for a brief space.

In that instant was born a sickening fear, but young Howland as quickly banished it, with a hot flush of shame at his own baseness.

"Pity it hadn't done just *that*, then!" harshly muttered the mine-owner, a little later. "If nothing else, it might have saved better lives than his!"

"Father!"

Abner Howland turned swiftly to his son, and the clear moonlight fell squarely athwart his face, showing nothing of the guilt which those harsh, almost brutal words might well have suggested.

"What, Jap, my boy?" he said, in softened tones as their eyes met. "You surely can't think I had any hand in such a cowardly trick?"

"Never!" came the response as their hands met in a warm grip. "And I'll make the coward eat his words, too, if I can trace the rumor back to its starting point!"

"That scent will lead you to Herman Gillespie, Jap," with a low, contemptuous laugh as he slipped a hand through the left arm of his son, and then moved slowly on, turning the next corner, having no particular destination in view, and only wishing to have a chat with his boy.

Jasper Howland made no answer to this speech, but the moonlight was clear enough to reveal a sad, troubled expression on his handsome face just then, sight of which caused the elder man to clench his jaws grimly enough, as though he found it no easy task to keep back the words which sought to escape his lips.

"Then you didn't hear Gillespie say that *we* tried to kill him, by smashing the stage that fashion?"

Jasper shook his head, saying:

"No, and I can't make it seem true that he would say such a thing, knowing that it was a base, malicious lie! I haven't been able to find out just who did set the rumor afloat, either, but afloat it surely is."

"Well, trace it down if possible, and when you've found the rascal, make him eat his words in public, or make him chew lead!"

For some length of time this subject was discussed by father and son, they keeping in slow motion all the time, moving hither and yon, with no purpose beyond guarding against interruption or intrusion by others.

Howland, the elder, took the matter far more easily than did his son, possibly because he was older and more nearly case-hardened against malicious calumny. But when they had finally decided upon the proper course to follow in order to counteract the harm which such an ugly rumor might do to their cause, Abner Howland turned to another point which was of particular interest to him, just then.

That was the stranger in town, whose gallantry and nerve had been so loudly sung by the passengers whom he had saved from destruction in the mad race down the Flume that day.

Abner Howland seldom wore a mask in the presence of his son, and on this occasion he made no attempt to disguise the manner of his defeat when trying to enlist Sam Singleton under the Daisy Belle banner.

"He's a good one, or all signs lie, and right well worth another effort, Jap. Maybe you'll meet with better luck than I had, if you pick your time to tackle the fellow. What say?"

"Why should we coax for what is reluctant to come our way, father?" asked the young man, with poorly disguised irritation. "Surely we have men enough to defend our rights, and more than right you are too honest a gentleman to wish for."

"That's one way of looking at it, son, but I never knew unarmed right to whip out well-armed wrong: did you?"

Young Howland had no answer ready this time, as his father appeared to know by instinct, since he dropped that point, and resumed:

"There's another little matter which might as well come up right now, Jasper, and that is this: I've heard an ugly rumor, too, and one that stings me far more keenly than all this silly chatter about our having part or lot in this Flume accident. Can you guess what I mean?"

"How should I, father?"

"Well, I mean about your being soft on this Gillespie girl."

"What! Who has dared—"

"Stop, son!" interrupted the mine-owner, lifting his free hand in a warning gesture. "I told the fellow he lied like a cur! I told him *my* boy would never turn dog and eat dirt of his own free will. And then I added just this:

"That I would shoot my only son down in his tracks with my own hand, rather than see him mate with the spawn of that oily devil, Herman Gillespie!"

Barely above his breath came these last words, yet so full of savage hatred and undying determination were they that Jasper Howland actually shrank away from his sire with a shiver of terror!

Before he could rally his shaken nerves to make answer, and ere the mine-owner could say more, a sharp cry rung forth from just around the corner to which they had been approaching while talking, and as though urged by the same impulse the two men sprang forward, hands seeking their weapons as they went.

Thanks to the remarkably clear moonlight, they instantly caught sight of two figures only a few yards up the street, one of them attempting to arise, the other bending over him, a bared blade flashing in the light as it was poised for a deadly stroke!

"Let up, you villain!" came a voice which at least the elder Howland instantly recognized, as a sharp ejaculation from his lips gave evidence.

"The stranger who—"

His words were blended with the sharp explosion of a revolver in the hands of his son, who had drawn and caught the drop with marvelous rapidity as he witnessed that dastardly attempt at murder.

Only the one shot was needed, for with a choking howl, the assassin flung up his hands, the knife sent whirling through the air by that spasmodic movement.

A blind staggering, then a limp and nerveless fall!

"Good on your head, but, flag of truce!" cried the Sport from Sweepstakes, as he scrambled to his feet, dashing back the hat brim which had been knocked down over his eyes by that treacherous blow.

"Steady, you!" commanded Abner Howland, his own pistol drawn and ready for use in case of emergency. "What's the row, stranger?"

"It's one that'll take *you* in, unless you can show clean hands, my fine fellow!" angrily cried the Silver Sport in turn. "If you're this cur's pals, why—"

"Go slow, stranger!" interrupted young Howland, stepping forward as he added: "I shot down the thug who was about knifing you, and that surely don't savor much of being *his* pals, does it?"

By this time the Sport was rallying his scattered senses, and recognizing the absurdity of his suspicions after such proof of friendliness, he begged pardon for his mistake.

"You see, gentlemen, I hardly knew just how big a mountain had dropped on top of my head," he added with a forced laugh.

"What brought it on, though?" asked young Howland, with a slightly nervous glance toward the fallen man, over whom Abner was bending.

Only to utter an ejaculation of angry surprise, starting back:

"Rustling Tom, by the holies!"

"What? Surely not—"

"Tom Russell, all the same," was the moody reply, and the elder Howland cast an uneasy glance toward half a dozen citizens who just then came running toward the spot, attracted by that shot.

For a brief space all was confused excitement over the tragedy, a goodly crowd gathering as by magic, and all eager to learn just how the affair had come about. As for the fellow, there was no question: that shot by moonlight had passed directly through his brain.

Then ugly looks and uglier mutterings were turned toward Singleton.

CHAPTER VII.

MUTTERINGS OF A COMING STORM.

"WHO'S he, to down a good boy like Tom?"

"Shot down like a dog, too!"

"Whar's his gun? An' him so turrible sudden on the draw!"

A score of similar sentences broke forth, low and subdued at first, but gaining in strength as others caught up the same key-note, and Sam Singleton could not help seeing that trouble was brewing rapidly, and that unless he made some sort of defense, and that right quickly, snap judgment might be taken, to his undoing.

"There's his club, you who ask after his gun," came first, and his unarmed hand made a gesture to fit the words which followed: "And right here you can see its signature, simply for the trouble of looking."

Moonlight though it was, that hand showed a trace of fresh blood, where that partially foiled stroke had wounded his scalp.

"That's *your* say, but Tom—who'll speak on *his* side, if 'tisn't those he called his friends in life?"

"Let 'em talk white, and I'll meet 'em on the same level," boldly cried the Silver Sport, facing those odds without a symptom of fear or flinching. "I only saw this fellow you call Rustling Tom once before he tried to knock my head off, just—"

"Then why'd he want to do you hurt?"

"Now you've struck it right on the point, pardner! Why should he? *Why*, if it wasn't that he recognized *me*, even as I recognized *him* as we passed each other?"

"You tried to make out ye didn't know him, only jest now!"

"Nor did I know him before to-day, when I first saw the fellow, but I knew him on sight to-night, and here you have it, on honor: Rustling Tom, as you call him, is the fellow who started

the big rock that came so nigh smashing the hearse on the Flume this very day!"

A brief silence followed this assertion, then it was broken by a shrill voice, doubtless coming from one of the Sure Thing faction:

"Because Herman Gillespie was aboard, of course!"

"He lies who says as much!" cut in Abner Howland, who had remained in the background so long, restraining his son from interfering even in words, by maintaining a strong grip upon his arm.

Possibly the mine-owner was willing to see this audacious stranger suffer a bit, in mind if not in person, although it was hardly likely that he would permit anything like lynch-law to be brought into play without a decided protest against such injustice.

But he could not allow this foul hint to pass unnoticed, and pushing to the side of the stranger, he added:

"The man lies who dares even hint that my side, as a party, had anything to do with the Flume affair. If Rustling Tom did—you say you are ready to make oath to him, stranger?"

"If I was on my death-bed—yes!" came the firm response. "I saw his face even plainer than I can see yours this minute. I saw his body half way down to his waist, and I can make oath to that as well. I neither know nor care what this fellow has been, but I solemnly swear that he was one of those who set that rock in motion which came so near knocking our whole outfit into a cocked hat to-day."

"Taking long chances, but maybe that was their only hope to down a Sure thing!" once more came that shrill voice, which no one present seemed able to recognize or to locate precisely.

Then Jasper Howland came to the front in answer to this repeated insinuation, and lifting a hand to command attention, he spoke sternly:

"I shot Thomas Russell, because I caught him trying to stab a man lying on the ground and who seemed unable to defend himself, and now I'm ready to serve the cowardly cur who dares fling out such slurs, after the same fashion, if he'll only pluck up nerve enough to show his head in the open!"

"And if there's more than my boy can handle, the old man's on deck and ready to hold his end level, bear in mind!" supplemented the senior Howland, evidently in no wise loth to join issue with the enemy right then and right there.

"Hello, gents! What appears to be the row, now?" came a deep-toned voice from the outer edge of that gathering. "Ah! *you*, is it, Mr. Howland—as usual?"

As the speaker came near enough he recognized the mine-owner, and matters hardly looked more amicable as Milton Muldraw pushed still further to the front.

Singleton was far from being at ease in mind or in body as he noted the turn matters were taking, and in hopes of averting the factional fight which seemed on the point of breaking forth, he spoke again:

"I'm accusing no man, or party of men, gentlemen. All I say is that I'm willing to make oath that this fellow had a hand in starting that rock above the Flume to-day, and no doubt he suspected that I had him spotted for the foul trick, and so tried to make himself safe by doing me up before I could start the hounds along his track."

"Rustling Tom, by holy!" ejaculated Milton Muldraw, who had forged far enough through that gathering to catch a fair glimpse of the dead desperado.

A disagreeable laugh followed these words, and his tigerish-looking eyes had a vicious glitter in the moonlight as they turned toward Abner Howland.

"Sorry for Daisy Belle, for Tom was one of your brag fighters, wasn't he, Howland?"

Not the words so much as the tone seemed to sting the mine-owner sharply, and one hand rested on a pistol-butt as he spoke:

"He was my man, if you call it that to be a friend of right against wrong, but if you dare even hint *he* was acting as *my* man while trying to wreck the stage—if he *did* so attempt—"

"I can make oath to the man, but beyond that I've no wish or right to go," gravely repeated Singleton, as those eyes turned his way.

Muldraw stepped briskly forward, paying no outward attention to the chief of the faction he was opposing, bending for an instant over the fallen desperado, then drawing back with a toss of his shaggy head.

"A center shot, whoever made it! Pity, too, for his confession might prove well worth paying a long price for!"

Here and there a low cheer arose at this significant speech, but blending with them were even more frequent hisses, both showing how hot and feverish that factional feeling was growing.

Sam Singleton recognized the growing danger, and knowing that should an actual fight occur over his luckless adventure, he could not help being drawn into it on one side or the other, he made yet another appeal to the good sense of the excited crowd.

"Let me explain just how it all came about, gentlemen, and then I'll stand ready to bear the blame or pay full penalty if you so decide I ought."

"That sounds white," approvingly said Muldraw. "Listen to the stranger, boys, if only because he is a stranger."

Singleton, of course, had no means of knowing just who or what this stunted giant might be, nor had he spare time to wonder why Muldraw should so abruptly turn peacemaker after doing his best to stir up evil passions; but he took a mental photograph of the Sure Thing manager for future reference, and then gave an off-hand account of the Flume affair, as well as his adventure with Rustling Tom there in town.

He told how, through a mere chance, he had been looking up the hollow above the stage trail, just as that huge mass of rock began to topple over from its bed of ages.

He described how he had in that same instant caught a clear view of a man, head and shoulders, with the red rays of the evening sun falling squarely across his face.

"I never saw him before, and have only seen him once since, but I took his photograph in that second, and I could swear to him among ten thousand others!"

After this solemn assertion, the Sport from Sweepstakes went on to tell of that meeting, accidental as he had thought it at first, but intentional on the part of Rustling Tom, as he now firmly believed.

"Unless he was on the hunt for just me, why come at me with a club as he did? There it lies and on my head you can find its mark. He meant murder, and that he failed in doing murder, I've this gentleman to thank."

And Sam turned to warmly grasp the hand of young Howland, and Jasper gravely spoke in his turn:

"I merely performed what I thought was my honest duty. I saw murder attempted, and I was too far off to check the cowardly blow by anything less than a bullet."

"Some day I'll try to give you better thanks for that service, Mr. Howland, but, just now—a last word with you, gentlemen!"

"It was through me that Rustling Tom met his death, if not exactly by my hand. I'm sorry that shot was fired, for I believe I could have held my own with the cur, taken at a disadvantage though I surely was."

"I've given you the correct account, now, and you know just as much as I do about the scrape. If there is to be any after-clap, I'm ready to meet it, when and where and however it may come."

"My name is Samuel Singleton from Sweepstakes, sometimes called the Silver Sport. I'm hanging out at the Blossom House while in Silverado, and I can be found right there by any persons who may think they have business with me."

"Now, my last word has been spoken, and I'll draw out until I'm asked to chip again in regular order."

With an off-hand bow which seemed to include everybody, the Sport faced about in the direction of his hotel, stepping briskly forward, just as though he never once thought of meeting with serious opposition from either faction.

Nor was any such opposition offered, although he hardly dared expect such good fortune.

With each step he fully anticipated being halted, either by word or by shot, but he showed nothing of his expectation outwardly.

A stranger among strangers, he knew that he was powerless to resist in case actual force should be called into play; hence he tried the power of bold bluffing, and with rare success, too.

In silence the crowd divided to permit his passage, and the Man from Sweepstakes walking with a free but leisurely stride, found himself fairly out of the jam with never a hand or a voice lifted to check his retreat.

But before he reached the next corner, he caught the echo of other footsteps following after, and turning with a frown, he recognized the young fellow to whose shot he owed his deliverance from the keen knife of the assassin.

At the same time he recalled a few of the words spoken during that exciting scene, and all at once—almost involuntarily—thought of the bluff offer which this young man's father had made for his services not two hours earlier that same evening.

"Strike while the iron is hot, eh?" he mentally exclaimed, his face and his heart both hardened under that suspicion.

"I reckon I owe you an apology, my friend," bluntly began Jasper Howland, as he came within easy speaking distance, a faint smile showing upon his face by moonlight. "It isn't my habit to chip into another man's game, but this time I really hadn't time to ask your permission. I only saw the knife, and—no harm, I hope, sir?"

"None to me, if that's what you mean."

"Glad to hear it, sir, and there's my hand on it, too!" with a frank extension of that member as he added: "Shake, pardner, and if any further trouble should arise, rest assured I'll be on hand to take all that belongs to me, by rights."

Sam hesitated for an instant, then responded:

"I'll shake of course, but with the understanding that it is merely as man to man, and not as on of a faction, you understand?"

Their hands joined, but the fingers of the junior member gave but slight pressure, and both face and voice turned gloomy, almost sullen.

"As man to man, of course, sir. I've cursed the day that this quarrel first started, and if it rested with me, another sun would not have time to rise on Silverado before the hatchet would be buried too deep for resurrection in this world!"

"That sounds as though you really meant it, pardner."

"I do mean it, sir! Mean it so thoroughly that I could pray for the Daisy Belle to peter out to-morrow, even though our last dollar was bound up in the mine—and it's not far from that, either!"

This came in an almost fierce outburst, and as though ashamed of the emotion into which he had been hurried, Jasper freed his hand from that grip, then hurried away through the moonlight like one who fears being pursued.

Sam Singleton watched that figure until it disappeared around the nearest corner, then gave vent to a low whistle as he resumed his way toward the Blossom House, muttering to himself:

"Is that the pure quill, now, or is it only some newfangled bait to catch a gudgeon, I wonder? Well, time will tell, I reckon."

CHAPTER VIII.

MOSES IN THE BULLRUSHES.

THE rest of that night passed by without further disturbance in town, though this would hardly have been the case had the rival factions been less evenly balanced in point of numbers.

The killing of the fellow who was declared to have, by himself or aided by as yet undiscovered mates, endeavored to wreck the stage on which one of the mining magnates had taken passage, offered too fine a chance for bringing about a fight which would decide the possession of the disputed twin lodes, had one side or the other been strong enough to feel confident of success in a pitched battle such as must surely follow the first direct blow.

As for the Man from Sweepstakes, who had so unwillingly mixed up in the factional dispute, he passed an ordinarily quiet night, although his head felt the effects of that murderous stroke from Rustling Tom's club.

He was somewhat later than usual in leaving his bed that morning, and only roused up in answer to the noisy summons of Jolly Dick Blue, who was waiting for a companion at the breakfast table.

The stage-driver had heard nothing of the disturbance, and Sam did not mention the affair, for he was one who preferred to play a lone hand as much as possible.

This was one reason why he shook off Jolly Dick almost immediately after their morning meal was discussed in company, for he knew that the honest fellow would insist on acting as his body-guard that day, or until the Rustling Tom episode was fairly over with.

In addition to this, Sam had another and even more potent reason for wishing to be alone when he once more sallied forth from the Blossom House.

It will be remembered that he had come to Silverado in order to keep an appointment made by a particular friend, whom he had agreed to meet on the day before, at a place in town known as the Bullrushes.

Beyond the bare fact of that appointment and the place of meeting, he knew absolutely nothing. A tried and true friend had called on him for help, and that was all, so far.

Although he more than half expected to hear further from the adventure of the past evening, Sweepstake's Sam betrayed no uneasiness to the outward eye as he left the hotel and leisurely strolled through the unpaved streets, lazily puffing at a fragrant cigar which certainly did not come out of any Silverado box.

"A saloon, named the Bullrushes," he was repeating in his mind as his big brown eyes took notes, almost without seeming to do so. "On one of the main streets, name unknown. Place among the toniest, speaking from a mining town point of view. Run by one Moses Alderman."

"That surely ought to be description enough for a fellow with the usual complement of eyes, so long as he keeps them open. And such being the case, what's the use in inviting attention by asking questions of outsiders?"

Acting upon this idea, then, Singleton leisurely made his way through town, looking for a saloon which would fill that description, but with all his seeming carelessness, keeping thoroughly on the alert in case the "after-clap" spoken of the evening before, should be in process of formation.

During that seemingly aimless stroll, the stranger met a number of persons, nearly all of

whom eyed him curiously, yet without speaking or showing any signs of a wish to check his steps.

As a matter of fact, but little excitement remained after the plainly justifiable killing of Thomas Russell, though matters might have taken a more serious turn had this stranger actually fired the shot which avenged the attempted stage-wrecking.

Silverado, though such a flourishing town from a mining standpoint, was hardly large enough to make that half-blind search for a particular building a matter of very many minutes, and presently the Sport was rewarded by the sight of a boldly lettered sign, bearing the word "BULLRUSHES," the syllables being divided by a rude representation of the biblical incident in which the young Moses first came into prominence.

"Moses in the bullrushes, for a fact!" he ejaculated, unable to resist a broad smile at that ambitious effort of some unknown genius in the artistic line of life.

But he was far too anxious for news of his friend to linger long over even such an amusing view, and stepping across the street, Singleton entered the saloon.

He found quite a little gathering there, and as all eyes instinctively turned toward the door at his coming, the instant silence which followed told him he almost surely had formed the subject of discussion but a minute before.

Sam did not allow this awkward fact to disturb his composure in the least, and while he would have preferred finding only the proprietor in, he gravely nodded to those there assembled, then crossed over to the bar, back of which stood an odd looking character.

A short, fat, roly-poly fellow, who was almost half as broad as he was tall, stood leaning his fat double chin on his folded arms, a genial smile lighting up his jovial face.

His pink pate was bald as a billiard ball, but the huge and drooping pair of mustaches, almost white in hue, yet surely not through excess of years, made ample amends for what was lacking above.

His small, fat-inclosed eyes were pink as those of a veritable albino, yet there was no lack of shrewd wit and keen intelligence in his broad, puffy face.

All this the Man from Sweepstakes took in at a glance, and before he had reached the bar, his query was ready.

"Good-morning, sir!" he saluted, with a quiet bow as the fat man drew erect. "This is the Bullrushes is it not?"

"And I'm Moses," broadly smiled the proprietor.

The eyes of all present were turned with undisguised curiosity upon the stranger, but he showed no signs of uneasiness, whatever he might have felt below that smooth, calm surface.

"Thanks. Then I have found the right place, and I have reason to think a friend has left a message here for me, sir; have you a note, or a letter, for Samuel Singleton?"

"Neither one nor the other, sir," came the prompt reply.

A faint frown of uneasy surprise showed itself upon that face, and the Silver Sport asked again:

"Might it not have been left here during your absence, though? With one of your assistants, for instance?"

Alderman shook his head positively.

"Impossible, sir! There's only one boss here, and that is the original Moses of the Bullrushes. If any such message had been left, I would certainly know of it."

This time that face betrayed nothing of the strong anxiety which its owner actually felt. One full day late, and he had expected that explanation to be ahead of his coming by several days, at the very least.

Still, he had no excuse for doubting the perfect truth of this man, and so made the best of his bitter disappointment.

"Delayed, I presume," as though speaking to himself, then adding in more distinct tones:

"If such a message should come for one of that name—Samuel Singleton—will you kindly tell the bearer that I am stopping at the Blossom House?"

"With all the pleasure in life, my dear sir," cordially declared Alderman, but with an odd twinkle coming into his pink eyes as he asked: "Stopping at the 'neutral hotel,' eh? Well, I'll bear that in mind, and—anything further, sir?"

"Well, yes, I reckon," with one of his genial smiles as he cast a glance over the persons present, not one of whom had spoken a word since his entrance.

"You see, my dear sir, I'm expecting to meet up with an old pard in Silverado, and as I've never struck this route before, I gave me a prominent landmark like the Bullrushes as a starting-point."

"I rather expected to find him here, waiting for me, but as he hasn't shown up yet, and as keeping track of my name and address may give you some little trouble, may I venture to call all hands to the bar? If I'm asking too great a favor, sir, and you, gentlemen, pray don't let

politeness toward a stranger hinder your saying as much."

Moses Alderman gave a chuckling, oily laugh, then said:

"Irrigation is the very life of a dry country, Mr. Singleton, and an invitation to wet up is always in order, so—this way, my gallant lads, and try to do honor to your city!"

No words could sound more frank and hearty than these, but Sam fancied there was a touch of malicious mischief lurking in those little pink eyes, and certainly those included in his invitation exchanged quick glances of more than ordinary meaning before they moved in a body toward the bar.

With apparent carelessness, but in reality keenly on his guard against possible treachery, the Silver Sport backed along the bar until his rear was perfectly covered by the wall, smiling genially as the citizens drew nearer.

All their gravity had vanished now, and each one seemed on the *qui vive* for something interesting or amusing, but not one said a word or made a movement which could confirm that sudden suspicion taken by the stranger.

For one thing, Samuel Singleton was a very light drinker, though he entertained no conscientious scruples against the moderate use of intoxicating liquors; but now he determined to play teetotaler, to guard against a barely possible drugging.

"Give the gentlemen their particular, please, Mr. Alderman, but as for *me*—bear with me, I beg, gentlemen all! I'm almost ashamed to own to such a babyish weakness in the presence of manly men, but I really cannot touch alcoholic liquor in any shape or form, under penalty."

Every hand dropped away from the glasses they were touching, and while more than one dark frown was directed his way, Moses Alderman seriously asked:

"Surely you invited these gentlemen to drink with you, sir?"

"And for me, as well," came the swift reply. "It's a scandalous fact, gentlemen, and I fairly blush to own the weakness, but liquor is the rankest of poisons to my constitution, and were I to take even the least of sips—well, *you'd* make a break, and *I'd* come as near throwing up my boots as anything you ever met with in all your life!"

Sam uttered these words with almost ludicrous solemnity, and none who saw and heard him then, could well doubt his perfect sincerity.

Still, it was a rather awkward situation, especially from the standpoint in vogue at a mining-town, and even the Silver Sport plainly felt as much, yet he manfully made the best of a bad bargain.

"If I might take a glass of water, and—what's the matter with a smoke, then?"

Moses Alderman gave another of his oily chuckles, then declared:

"Just what I was about to propose as the smoothest way through the brush! Fill up, gentlemen, and here's your white whisky, Mr. Singleton!"

While speaking, Moses pushed the water-pitcher and a glass toward the stranger, grinning broadly as he turned to take a couple of cigar boxes from the rear shelf, keeping the lids closed until all glasses were charged and emptied, then deftly sliding the cigars directly in front of the stranger, flipping back the lids as he said:

"Take your choice, my dear sir, for these are the only brands on sale in Silverado!"

Despite his nerve, Sam Singleton gave a little start as he caught sight of those gaudily colored labels, for now he saw the trap into which that friendly invitation had cast him.

One cover displayed a poker hand, running from ace to ten-spot, all hearts, thus forming a royal flush, and hardly requiring the lettering above to tell one it was a "Sure Thing."

The other bore the representation of a very *decollete* maiden, crowned with brilliantly hued daisies, and labeled the "Daisy Belle."

It was an adroit scheme to trick the stranger into showing a preference, real or false, for one or the other of the rival factions, yet he could readily divine how natural it was for a saloon to keep both brands on sale, to suit the tastes of all customers.

All eyes were turned curiously upon him, waiting his choice with unconcealed interest, and for a moment or two even this cool Sport was at a loss how to act.

He had no idea of even so superficially betraying himself as a partisan, however, and instantly rallying, he looked at the cigars, then took one weed from each box with right and left hand, at the same instant.

"Begorra! wonder av he has a double-barreled mouth an him, thin?" exploded an excitable Patlander, unable to hold in longer.

CHAPTER IX.

"UNDER WHICH KING, BEZONIAN?"

THE general laugh which followed this remark gave the Sport an additional moment or two in which to solve the problem so unexpectedly thrust upon him, and his nimble tongue was not long at a loss for words.

"I've often wished that I was so gifted, for a

fact, but never more heartily than right now!" he asserted, his humorous eyes turning from the cigars to those eager faces hard by. "I've often heard say that no man can have too much of a good thing, but when it comes to *two* good things—go away trouble!"

"Begor", av he did have two mout's it's niver t'rough talkin' he'd be. Oi'm t'inkin', annyhow, thin!"

"Don't try to crowd the mourners, Patsy," blandly reproved Moses Alderman, his maliciously twinkling eyes betraying how thoroughly he was enjoying the awkward jest. "The gentleman is only making up his mind which horn—excuse me!—which weed he fancies the hardest."

Sam Singleton laughed softly as he glanced at that fat face, then back at the two rolls of tobacco.

"Now you have struck it, pardner! It's a case of t'other dear charmer, you see? Not that I love one more, or the other less, but making a selection just now means rather more than favoring one delight above another fully as fine—don't it, Mr. Moses?"

But those pink eyes were just then turned toward the front door, where a new-comer had paused upon the threshold, and Alderman made no reply. But another and coarser voice spoke up in his stead, saying:

"We're waitin' on ye, boss. Light up an' show yer true colors!"

Sam had followed the glance of those pink eyes, and had no difficulty in recognizing the new-comer. That broad, burly, powerful figure was not one readily forgotten after once being seen, and though he had no means of knowing just what position he held in the factional fight which was stirring Silverado from center to circumference just then, Singleton did know that in this man he saw a power in the land.

From the words let fall the evening before, he knew that Milton Muldraw represented the Sure Thing faction, since he had so openly antagonized Abner Howland, and the suspicion occurred to his busy brain that this stunted giant had purposely followed him to the Bullrushes.

"When you come to a place you can't walk over, what's the matter with crawling through?" drawlingly remarked the Sport, a moment after the blunt hint; and placing the rival cigars side by side on the bar, he produced and opened a penknife. "If a man is built so that he can only stow away one pound at a time, and has a pound each of prime ham and extra steak set before him on one plate, what ought he to do?"

With a quick motion he cut off the ends of both cigars, then put away his knife, to draw forth a short-stemmed meerschaum pipe, into the well-blackened bowl of which he coolly proceeded to crumble the ends of *both* cigars, taking care to pick them up with one and the same motion.

Apparently not one of the gathering was prepared for just such a move as this, and malicious smiles turned to blank dismay as the cunning stranger avoided the trap which had been placed for him.

"Will ye look at *that*, now!" once more exploded the Irishman. "Ow-wow! but he's Satan's own an' ahl, an' it's Patsy McGlone dat's tellin' dat same, thin, d'ye moind, now!"

Although his snare had failed to hold the fish he sought to land, Moses Alderman was far too good-natured to hold a grudge, and broke into a laugh which caused his fat person to shake like an animated bag of jelly, and striking the counter with one pudgy fist, he cried:

"Shake, stranger, and score one against Moses! You're the first man I've found smart enough to dodge between drops when caught out in an unexpected shower. Put it there, and on me at sight!"

Singleton was too politic to refuse such a frank offer, and his palm crossed that of the jolly saloon-keeper, although he felt far more like smiting those puffy lips as payment for that malicious trap.

"That's all right, Moses, and you're entirely welcome to all the information you've won by this deal."

"Yes, but come out flat-footed, man, like a man!" cried one of the citizens as he helped himself to a cigar from the Sure Thing box. "Which side are you for; Sure Thing, or Daisy Belle?"

"Both, if either, my dear sir," coolly responded the Man from Sweepstakes.

"Get out! You can't be fish and fowl, both at the same time!"

"That's *your* say-so, pardner, not mine," blowing a stream of very blue but hardly sweet-scented smoke toward the impatient partisan. "No doubt you would have taken odds that I couldn't smoke two cigars at one and the same time, but I proved that, easy as grunting when you fall into a chuck-hole on a dark night."

"Talk's cheap, but—"

"You're not obliged to listen, my dear sir, simply because I'm giving wind for nothing, with a spice of worldly wisdom thrown in to make good weight. Or—do *you* own this establishment, pray?"

"Shut trap, Clipstone!" sharply called out Moses Alderman, then adding for the stranger's benefit: "He don't own even this establishment's *slate*, Mr. Singleton, although you'd sure-

ly think so if I was to put it on exhibition right now!"

The growler fell back in confusion as a burst of laughter greeted this keen cut, and feeling that the atmosphere was a little less oppressive now that good-humor began to return, the Sport from Sweepstakes spoke again as he stared contemplatively at the vapor rising above his head.

"It's jolly good luck to them both I'm wishing, gents. May the Sure Thing pan out a Daisy, and the Belle prove to be a Sure Thing for filling every pocket her owners can hang to their trowser-legs! More than this, who can wish for, gentlemen?"

"Well, it's hearty enough as far as it goes," hesitatingly spoke up one of the persons who had been present when Sam made his entrance. "Still, can't you push it just an inch or two further, sir?"

"In which direction, my friend?"

"Come out from cover, and show your true colors, of course!"

"That's what! Ye cain't set on no fence in Silverado, boss, an' the suddener ye find that out, the quicker ye'll ketch a healthy rest."

This was a threat with hardly any pretense at disguise, and Singleton immediately met it as such, his face losing its bland smile, and his voice growing harder as he spoke in reply:

"Now you're beginning to *talk*, and I'll offer my share of naked truth, as viewed from my present standpoint."

"You say I can't keep my perch on the fence, and I say that I'll remain strictly neutral just as long as I possibly can. When that becomes impossible—and it can only take that turn through one or the other of your rival factions butting me off by main force—then I'll go in tooth-and-tongue on the *other side*, to fight until the last dog is dead! And right there you have it, sir!"

"With the bark peeled off, too, I should say," spoke up Muldraw, coming forward like one who feels he has kept in the background as mere auditor quite long enough.

"Thank you for—nothing, sir," coldly retorted Singleton, filling that break with a little bow which pointed his last words.

"Don't bite me, I beg of you, Mr. Singleton, for I'd a mighty sight sooner have you as friend than enemy. And that reminds me: even a tony gentleman can't afford to bestow his friendship as a free gift, so if you will kindly name your terms, sir, I'll call it a bargain without the faintest symptoms of haggling on our side."

Muldraw spoke with an adroit blending of politeness and off-hand candor which one could hardly take offense at, yet the Sport was unfavorably impressed by both man and speech.

"No doubt you mean well, sir, but allow me to state—"

"Wait a bit, please. I'm talking sober business, my dear fellow, and mean just what I say. I want you on our side, and I'll pay you your own price for enlisting under the Sure Thing banner."

"And I'll do even better than that," came a sharp voice from the front entrance as its owner stepped inside the Bullrushes. "I'll pay Mr. Singleton good wages for simply keepin' out of the muss over the Twin L's!"

Sam Singleton recognized the owner of the Daisy Belle in this second bidder, and as the full force of the growing farce struck his sense of the ridiculous, he burst into a hearty laugh.

But his was the only sound of mirth within those walls. The two leaders were exchanging defiant looks, the group of citizens was silently separating, forming two distinct bodies, no doubt representing the rival factions.

Even jolly Moses Alderman looked grave and troubled over what bade fair to prove the spark which might easily turn all Silverado into a bloody battlefield.

With his nerves growing steadier as the crisis seemed drawing nearer, Sam glanced from face to face, preferring to let the others set the pace to thrusting himself too prominently forward just then.

He had not long to wait, for rising clear above that low, ominous muttering came the words from one of the little groups:

"Let him show his true colors, one way or the other! If he's not *for* us, he must be *against* us!"

"That's what! Which be we to call ye, stranger; man or dog?"

This was blunt speaking with a vengeance, and despite his wise resolve to temporize as far as possible, the Silver Sport caught fire at once, and swiftly retorted:

"It's not such snarling as yours that can make me talk out, stranger, but I've never seen the day when I was afraid to utter the naked truth, and right here you have it."

"I came to Silverton from Sweepstakes on private business, knowing nothing of the local trouble which seems to be brewing here. With that dispute I have nothing whatever to do, and if you should set a thousand curs snapping and snarling at my heels, you couldn't begin to drive me contrary to my own free will."

"I'm here, now, and here I mean to stay

until my private business is fully disposed of. I naturally prefer keeping out of all other affairs, and will do so if I can without too much bother.

"I know nothing whatever of your Twin Lode racket. Either, neither, or both may be in the right for all I care, or can say. Still, rather than waste your valuable time further, I'll come down a single peg, and admit that I may be open to conviction."

This was hardly the ending Sam intended to make when he first began speaking, but his brain was busy, and something warned him he ought not to throw away the chance to remain in town on a peace-footing until this non-appearance of his friend should be explained.

With cooler heads taking notes, this contrasting speech might have called for notice, but both leaders were only too glad to catch at even a chance of winning over such a desirable recruit, and both Muldraw and Howland lifted a hand.

"One at a time, please, gentlemen," enjoined Sam. "And first come, first served, is a good rule to follow. You were here first, sir," with a bow toward Muldraw. "What arguments have you to offer in favor of— You represent the Sure Thing, do you not?"

"And mighty proud of it, too!"

"You are the owner, then, of course?"

"No; but while the owner is off the field, my say-so goes. My name is Milton Muldraw, and I'm manager of the Sure Thing Lode."

The Man from Sweepstakes coolly looked the fellow over from head to foot, noting his unusually broad shoulders and immense trunk for one whose height was barely up to the average.

Briefly described, Milton Muldraw was a person who ought to have measured several inches over six feet, taking his weight into consideration; yet his bulk was composed of solid flesh, strong muscle and heavy bones, with hardly a pound of fat or useless tissue.

It was as though a modern giant had been forcibly compressed, gaining in breadth and thickness what he lost in height.

A grim smile caused his heavy beard to bristle a bit more than usual as he saw this inspection begin, but instead of showing displeasure at such a proceeding, he turned slowly around, as though desirous of helping the stranger form his decision.

"Thanks," returned Singleton, with a light gesture. "I'd be lying if I was to express a fear of your ever being hung for your beauty, but you look like a tolerably tough nut to crack, for a fact."

"My shell's never been broken yet, and more than one good fellow has tried his level best," came the answer.

"There was never a man so good but he met his better, provided he kept in the arena long enough," quietly suggested the Sport; "but, this isn't strictly business, is it?"

"I'm only waiting for you, sir. My offer still holds good."

"You say you represent the Sure Thing?"

"When the boss is away, yes."

"And you really wish to secure my services? As chief, general, high-muck-a-muck, of course?"

An involuntary burst of surprise came at this assumption.

CHAPTER X.

COMING TO TERMS.

MILTON MULDRAW ought to have been prepared for some such question, after the almost insolent demeanor of this stranger; but even he was taken aback for a moment or two.

Still, he was not one to remain long at a loss, particularly where a rival was chuckling at his discomfiture; so rallying, he answered, bluntly enough:

"Of course not, sir. The Sure Thing is already fully supplied in that line, so long as Herman Gillespie can give orders to me, his manager. I want you as a worker, and am ready to pay you any reasonable price."

Sam Singleton listened to this explanation with arching brows and slightly curling lip, waiting until Muldraw had concluded, then speaking in turn:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but if I had surmised that such was your wish, I'd have spared you all this waste of wind. Still, as you and I have started in on a dicker, we'll try it a bit further."

"No need of more talk than just words enough to name your price," bluntly declared the Sure Thing manager.

"Don't you be so mighty sure of that, my dear fellow; my terms may prove higher than you can command, and yet I'll never say a word about the almighty dollar, either."

"What else can you mean, then?"

"Just this: you've got to prove that your faction contains a better man than I am, before I even talk further of enlisting in the ranks."

"How, better?"

Through all this Abner Howland had been listening with poorly concealed impatience, fearing lest his rival should snap up this highly desirable ally for the Sure Thing before his chance came around; but now he broke in, almost savagely:

"Will you give the Daisy Belle an equal chance at that, young man?"

"With all the pleasure in life, my dear sir, merely subject to the same conditions."

"I accept them, without any ifs or ands, then!"

"And so do I, only—make 'em a bit plainer, can't you?" growlingly asked Muldraw.

Sam smiled at this jealous haste, and could not help feeling a bit flattered by such undisguised eagerness to secure his services for the Twin Lodes.

"Well, gentlemen, it may be that you've heard me hint at something of the kind before, but I always *did* like to have the table cleared of all dead wood before I sat down to a quiet game for big stakes. And so, bear with me for a minute or two, and then I'll get down to solid business once more."

"When I set face toward Silverado, from Sweepstakes, I did so in obedience to a call sent me by a tried and trusty pard. He simply told me that he would stand in need of my help, on a certain date, and asked me to meet him here in the Bullrushes."

"I've done my part toward keeping that appointment, but as yet my friend has not shown up. He will surely come, if still alive, and when he *does* come, my services must be at his disposal for as long as he cares to claim them."

"Pray, what has all this got to do with us?" asked Muldraw.

"Everything or nothing, just as you may elect, my dear sir," came the reply. "If either of you gentlemen succeed in winning me over to your side of this factional fight, it must be with the understanding that I am at liberty to draw off in favor of my pard, as soon as he asks for my help."

"But, suppose he should be fighting on the other side?"

"That is not at all likely, but if such *should* prove to be the case, then you'd have a pair of us to buck against."

Muldraw frowned at this peremptory announcement, but not so Abner Howland. For his part, he would rather secure this man's neutrality in the fight which could hardly be averted much longer, than to run any risk of his being arrayed in the Sure Thing uniform.

"I'll agree to that condition, so far as the Daisy Belle is concerned," he declared, quietly. "Finish your talk, Mr. Singleton, please, and come down to your terms and conditions."

"It's like buying a pig in a poke, but I'll risk as much as the next man," declared Muldraw, sullenly. "Hurry up, and strike color."

"Thanks, awfully! If I hadn't been born both modest and bashful, I'd really begin to put on frills over your flattering anxiety to secure my humble services, even under a limit," blandly returned the Sport, plainly enjoying the situation in spite of a possible after-clap.

"Well, I've told you just why I came to town, and why I resolved to keep religiously in the middle of the road when I came to hear of this little family dissension of yours. I thought I could hold myself purely neutral during the few days I might have to linger in Silverado, but I begin to see that I was in error as to that."

"Without self-flattery, I think I am inside of truthful bounds when I tell you, candidly, that I am what fair judges would term a good little man, speaking from a sporting point of view."

"Ow-wow! An' him born so modest and bashful, faith!"

Sam joined good-naturedly in the laugh which greeted this speech, well pleased that it should be so, too. So long as the others could be kept in a state of good-humor, he knew he had no serious cause for fearing rough treatment.

"That is my misfortune, not my fault, Patsy, so touch lightly on the raw, please."

"That's a gentleman spoke, an' it's Patsy McGlone's yer fri'nd from this toime ahn, sor!" impulsively cried the Irishman, pressing forward from the Daisy Belle squad, to warmly grip the hand of the stranger who had so genially met his quip.

Muldraw frowned, for every little point seemed to turn against his side, yet he held his peace, resolved to succeed, if anything like a fair chance was offered him.

"Fall back, McGlone, and let the gentleman finish his talk," commanded the owner of the Daisy Belle.

Obedience was instant; then Sam picked up the thread where it had been broken off by this little incident.

"As I started to say, I was strongly tempted to keep in the middle of the road, even if I had to fight for the privilege. Had I been my own master, I'm not so sure that I wouldn't have stuck to that line, in spite of all odds, for I do hate even the semblance of being driven one way when my preference leads to another!"

"But, there was my pard and his needs to think of, and so I am taking my medicine with as good a grace as possible."

"Still, if you take me at all, it must be on *my* terms, and right here you have them, gentlemen of both factions:

"Let the Sure Thing and the Daisy Belle push their best man to the front, and if Sam Singleton fails to hold his end fairly level with the two champions—"

"Suppose *both* men down you, then what?" interrupted Muldraw.

"That is scarcely supposable, my dear sir," coolly declared Singleton, his brows arching.

"But, play it *was*. What then?"

"It calls for an unconscionable stretch of the imagination to suppose any such thing, but just to keep peace in the family—all right! If I'm doubly defeated, what's the matter with the two victors fighting it out with each other, to see which one shall claim my remains?"

"Kilkenny cats, be gob!" exploded the fun-loving Irishman, unable to restrain his mirth at this cool proposal.

"Give that bull-calf rope enough to hang himself with, some of you fellows!" angrily growled the Sure Thing manager, then turning back to the Silver Sport. "And in case you should turn up winner?"

"That sounds more like it, and is a heap sight easier to answer, my good friend. In that case, I'm left to go my own way, foot-free, a neutral so long as I choose to keep out of the mix."

"That sounds fair enough on the surface, I'm sure," said Howland.

"And a fair shake is all I ask of any man, or set of men, sir," the Sport quickly rejoined. "I tried to keep to myself, and asked nothing better than to be let alone by both of your factions; but this did not seem to meet with your approval, it seems."

"Well, look at it from our point of view, and I reckon you see just why we wanted to find out where you stood, sir."

"I do begin to see it, and if you fellows had given me time enough to investigate the question for myself, no doubt I could have pitched in of my own accord to help the side which is in the right. But that wouldn't suffice, and so—take up with my offer just made, swearing on honor to abide by it, or come and take me—if you can!"

For the first time since that rather curious affair began, Singleton permitted his real sentiments to come to the surface, and now, with hands resting conveniently high the brace of revolvers at his middle, his flashing eyes swept over all present, the very picture of dauntless defiance.

It was a bit risky, perhaps, flinging forth such a bold challenge in the face of so many rough, armed men, but the result justified the venture, and the Sport from Sweepstakes was kept enough to see that he had gained for more than he had lost by giving way to his anger.

"We'll fight you fairly, if we fight you at all, Mr. Singleton," the owner of the Daisy Belle declared, frankly. "For my part, I've already agreed to your conditions, let the others be what they may."

"One question more, please," cut in Muldraw. "Who has the naming of the tests?"

"I'm not *all* hog, dear sir, even if I have been doing the most of the grunting up to date. Let your champions name their class, then set the best pattern they know how. I'll try to copy that sample, and after, whether I equal it or fail, I'll set the next example, keeping to the same class, however."

"If I am defeated in both tests, of course that ends the matter for the one side, and I'll have to try conclusions with the other faction, to win or lose after the same manner, at its best man's surest hold."

"If the first match should result in a tie—with any equal number of honest men taken from both factions to judge—it is all to begin over again, with different feats."

"Do I make my meaning perfectly clear, gentlemen?"

"You mean that my man is to do something, and you are to imitate it—if you can?" asked Muldraw, his eyes glowing vividly.

"Precisely," blandly answered the Silver Sport. "With only one thing barred, of course: the test is not to involve life or death, since I am not my own master, just at present."

"You'd be of mighty little use to the Sure Thing *dead*, so that's wasting breath to no purpose."

Muldraw spoke like one who counted the victory already as good as won, but Sam merely smiled at that. There was no lack of self-confidence in his composition, and whether he knew it or not, the Sure Thing manager was only making himself a harder fight for victory by so openly betraying his brutal sentiments.

"If you have any further questions to ask, now is the time to promulgate. I've tried to make my meaning perfectly clear, but after the struggle begins, it will be too late for disputing over a possible misunderstanding of terms and conditions."

"If it *should* happen to turn out a tie, you winning one test and losing the other, it's try again, and stick to it until one side admits a fair and square defeat?"

"Precisely, sir."

"Then I've no further questions to ask, and I'll nominate as the Sure Thing champion—Milton Muldraw!"

This came with a bow of mock politeness, but that grim smile told how confident the speaker felt in himself.

The Man from Sweepstakes nodded in recog-

dition of that salute, then turned an inquiring glance toward Alner Howland.

"And your nomination, sir?"

That face grew more wrinkled than ever as the wiry mine-owner looked toward his burly rival, then dryly said:

"I reckon I can't do much better than follow suit. And when you come to take the couple of us all in a bunch, Mr. Singleton, I fancy you will think you've got both the big and the little of it!"

"Dynamite can do more damage than a much larger bulk of common powder, I've heard tell," smilingly answered the Silver Sport. "Who knows? I may down our bulky, sawed-off giant here, only to succumb to the pigmy as represented by Mr. Howland!"

"Talk's cheap, but you'll find it takes heap sight more than idle wind to upset the Sure Thing this bout," bluntly retorted Muldraw, then adding: "When shall we begin our little circus, sir?"

"Just as soon as you see fit, Mr. Muldraw. I'm always ready."

CHAPTER XI.

MIGHTY MEN OF MUSCLE.

MULDRAW gave a chuckle as his hairy hands began unbuckling the leather belt which clasped his middle, supporting the knife and brace of revolvers which he habitually wore.

As a rule, armed men are no rarity in a frontier town, or among the denizens of the mining regions, yet something of the danger which menaced the peace of Silverado may be gathered from the simple fact that unarmed men were the rare exception among her citizens, and all he had seen since leaving the stage the evening before, Sam had noticed were thoroughly "heeled," as though expecting immediate use for their tools of war.

He himself was well armed, but it was only since his attempted assassination by Rustling Tom that he had made open display of that fact.

Had he carried his guns then, as he did now, Jasper Howland might have been spared a cartridge, and Silverado been out a rope used for lynching purposes!

Some such reflection as this was running through the mind of the Silver Sport as he watched the movements of the "sawed-off giant," as he had so appropriately dubbed the Sure Thing manager, but despite that far from comfortable fancy, one hand was kept never far away from the butt of a revolver.

So far nothing more dangerous than words had been called into play, but among so many rough customers he knew there might easily be another Tom Russell, and only a fool requires a second warning of that nature.

Despite his seeming carelessness, too, Sweepstakes Sam placed very little faith in this modern Hercules, and it was not until Muldraw removed his belt of arms and placed them on the bar under care of Moses that he felt fairly assured no "accident" was to take place through that handling.

"Keep one eye on the guns, Moses, and don't let any monkeying go on while I'm cutting out a pattern for this gent to copy—if he can!" said the manager, then removing his coat and rolling up his sleeves.

As he did this, a sidelong glance toward the stranger betrayed his real wish: that stripping process was more through a desire to display a few of his wonderful muscles than any need of baring the skin in the exhibition which he had determined to give as a pattern.

There was a languid sort of curiosity expressed in that handsome face, but even Muldraw could not flatter himself that Singleton was feeling aught of dismay, so far.

And even as he gave that glance of insolent triumph, the stranger bent an ear toward Moses, who appeared to be making a whispered communication across the bar.

That was precisely what was being done, but the Sure Thing manager was not acute enough of hearing to catch the words, sounded in friendly warning:

"I know his trick, stranger. It's done by bull-strength, and two of your bigness couldn't match him at that sort."

"Well, perhaps not, but I'll at least watch what he does before owning up beaten."

"It's his trick, surs! When your turn comes, try a bit of quick and active work, for that's your only show to best him."

This sounded like a friendly bit of advice, and Singleton received it as such, nodding his gratitude for the pointer, with just as much good will as though he fully intended profiting by it.

With his stock of good humor by no means added to by that whispered interchange, which he was pretty well convinced meant him no good, so far as Alderman was concerned, Muldraw cut his preliminary movements short by catching one of the round-topped card-tables by an edge, jerking it out nearer the center of the sanded space before the bar, then turned toward Singleton to say:

"I want the use of a few men to hold this thing steady, sir. Shall I pick them out, or do you claim that privilege?"

"It's your minute in the arena, Mr. Muldraw, so do your own selecting. When my turn comes, if I don't like your choice, maybe I'll try to better it."

"All right, my hearty! I'd just as soon take dead weight as alive, but since the last is handiest—pile on, lads! I reckon there's enough of you who've seen the trick, to know what's wanting."

Amid laughter and jesting, one after another of those rough allies stepped forward to the table, the first man lying across its top, holding to one edge with his hands, the next stretching out close alongside him.

Two others crossed the first pair at right angles, and then a final brace mounted on top of the four, each man clinging as best he might to either the edge of the table or to those persons who had been first to take position.

With a grim smile on his face the Sure Thing manager watched this human pile while in course of formation, then turned for a leisurely glance over the trim, by no means large figure of his rival.

"Shall I make it a big beat, or would you rather come off loser by a smaller margin, Mr. Singleton?" he asked, with complacent assurance.

"You are cutting out the pattern, sir, and ought to know best what your cloth will stand without falling short. Suit yourself, and I'll never kick."

"All right, then, my hearty and—climb up there for a cap-sheaf, Clipstone, and if your hooks don't grip tight enough, sock in your teeth, and never mind who's squealing! This is for the glory of the Sure Thing, bear in mind, my lads!"

The fellow last named at once complied, and only waiting until the human pyramid on top of the card-table had grown steady in place, Muldraw dropped to his knees on the sanded floor, crawling under the table and gathering his limbs well under him, bowed his head until his immense shoulders were crowded against the table top.

Even those who had witnessed a similar performance on the part of this modern Atlas before, watched his movements with almost breathless interest, hence it is hardly to be wondered at that the keen eyes of the Silver Sport should likewise be taking careful notes.

"Don't break your back trying it, pardner," once more whispered the fat saloon-keeper over his counter, unnoticed by any other in that moment of general interest. "Let him take that trick, then get even on the next turn."

"How much does the Sure Thing pay you for acting as capper, Moses?" coolly asked the Silver Sport.

"Honest Injun I mean—look at that, man, and judge for yourself!" almost angrily spoke Alderman as Muldraw took action.

The man of mighty muscle took merely time enough to arrange his limbs in those close quarters, then putting forth his enormous strength, he lifted that heavy load of human flesh until the legs of the groaning table cleared the floor, then moved slowly, awkwardly forward, hands on knees and arms bracing his bent body to support that burden.

For at least a dozen feet he kept on, then lowered the loaded table to the floor, stooping down until he could crawl out from those contracted quarters, flushed from the great exertion, but still more from anticipated victory.

"Merely a little one to start the fun, you see, Mr. Singleton," was his mocking salutation as he met that grave gaze. "When you've copied that example, I'll take great pleasure in offering you another, better worth the notice of a man of muscle."

"Well, it's a new wrinkle to me, for a fact," frankly admitted the Silver Sport, removing the weapons from his middle, and deliberately beginning to strip off his outer garments. "Wouldn't wonder if I was to make a laughing stock of myself, but we'll try it a whirl, just for luck."

"You really mean it?"

"Does that surprise you so mighty much, then? Well, where I was raised, we've got a habit of never saying beaten until the last card is played, and then the facts can speak for themselves. But, I say!"

"Say it, sir!"

"Who's to decide whether I win or lose, by the way?"

"Facts speak for themselves, remember," mocked the other, with a low, disagreeable laugh. "But if that fails to suit your fancy, pick your man to do the judging. I'll be satisfied with any one you fancy most."

"That sounds white enough, and so— Will you serve, sir?" turning toward the saloon-keeper, with an off-hand bow.

"Just as lieve as not, if both gents are agreeable."

"That settles it, then, and here goes to make a holy show of myself, or a monkey out of some one else!"

With a deft movement Sweepstakes Sam slipped out of his shirt, standing with only an under-vest covering his torso. And as he looked, Muldraw could not choke back a low ejaculation of amazement.

Although the Silver Sport, dressed, had

looked the well-built, well-proportioned man of a little more than average size and weight, now that he was stripped nearly to the skin, he actually seemed several sizes larger than before.

If his person lacked the great bunches of muscle which gave Muldraw such pride, it exhibited muscle enough for all purposes, and much more evenly distributed.

But Sweepstakes Sam was not on exhibition, just then, and barely waiting to see that the human pyramid was still in place, he slipped under the table, copying the preliminary movements of his rival with a single exception: his arms were passed around two of the table legs.

A long breath, then a lift. The great weight stirred, but failed to rise clear of the floor, and Muldraw broke out in a hoarse laugh of triumph, for now he felt victory was surely his.

Just as though that laugh was the needed spur, Singleton Sam made an effort, and this time with complete success!

He bore that awkward burden forward, only letting the legs of the table touch the floor when they had passed beyond the broad mark which Muldraw had scored in the white sand with a foot as his limit.

Although their sympathies were naturally with the representative of their own faction, even the Sure Thing partisans joined in the enthusiastic cheer which burst from the lungs of the other faction as the Man from Sweepstakes crept forth from beneath the table, at once turning toward the chosen judge, who, however, did not wait to be questioned before rendering his decision.

"A tie!"

"He failed to stir the table at his first attempt!" angrily protested Muldraw, flushed with hot rage and chagrin.

"Or I'd have called it beat on you, since he moved the load full two feet further than you carried it," promptly retorted Alderman, who seemingly stood in no particular fear of the Sure Thing manager.

"Did you raise any objection to this gentleman acting as judge, Mr. Muldraw?" asked Sam, with ominous politeness.

"Let it go for a tie, then, and much good may it do you. It's your turn, now, and all hands are waiting to see just what you make of it."

The admission came with an ill grace, but it was an admission, and after the strain he had endured during those few seconds, the Silver Sport had no desire to have the terrible test over again.

For this reason, then, he asked for no breathing spell after that tremendous exertion, but, putting the now vacated table aside, he selected one of the ordinary wooden-bottomed chairs, his actions jealously watched by his adversary, who grimly gave warning:

"Do your level prettiest, Mister Man, for I'm more than ever resolved to have you for the Sure Thing army!"

"It's winning before wearing, please remember, my dear fellow," coolly retorted Sam, glancing keenly over the company like one who has some difficulty in selecting from so much good material.

But that was merely a blind, for he, too, was determined to win at all hazards, and hence would take no long chances.

Despite his seeming carelessness he had been taking notes from the very outset, and if necessary he could have picked out each Daisy Belle partisan from those who favored the rival faction.

He needed two men for the feat which he had decided upon as his "pattern" for Muldraw to copy and was strongly tempted to select both from among the Daisy Belle division; but that might give his adversary an excuse for "kicking" against defeat, so he took Patsy McGlone for one of the pair, and another of about equal weight from the opposing ranks.

Taking a second chair and placing it so that it faced the first, he bade the two men be seated, adding:

"Grip fast to the bottom, my lads, for if I give you a bit of a ride at first, you may catch a tumble at the end of it—see?"

With half-sheepish grins of doubting anticipation, the two fellows seated themselves, and then Singleton stepped in between the chairs, squatting down with one on each side of him, reaching under the bottoms to grip the back-boards, thus bringing the round in front of each chair squarely in the hollow of his arm as it was slightly bent.

"Steady, now, and hold your level, my lads!" he cried, sharply, the next instant putting forth his almost marvelous powers, lifting both chairs clear of the floor, and as he rose to an erect position, straightening out his arms until the two men were held on a level with his shoulders!

Once more an involuntary cheer burst forth, but the Man from Sweepstakes paid no attention to this applause, sweet though it may have sounded to his ears.

Slowly, showing no outward signs of the great strain to which he was subjecting himself, the athlete Sport turned around with his double burden still held at arm's-length. Then, when the circle was completed, he moved toward the bar, back of which stood Moses Alderman in open-mouthed amazement, and gently depositing

first one and then the other of the chairs upon the counter, drew back with a low bow.

Then the wild applause burst forth from both factions alike, for powerful though their partisanship was, hardly one then present but was fully capable of appreciating a muscular display of such high class as this.

The Silver Sport bowed again in acknowledgment of that flattering compliment, then turned toward where Muldraw was standing in sullen silence, inclining his head gracefully and motioning toward the two men who still retained their seats as placed, then saying:

"After me is manners, my dear Mr. Muldraw! I've set you a fair pattern, and now, will you oblige all hands by copying after it?"

"If I do, will you own up beaten?"

"That is for Judge Alderman to decide, my dear sir, and how can he do that before you give him a specimen to go by?"

"All right! Climb down out of that, you fellows, and I'll do it!" gruffly ordered the Sure Thing manager.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SILVER SPORT A WINNER.

WARNED by his recent experience that he had no mean task on hand if he hoped to escape defeat in place of winning the victory on which he had so surely counted, Muldraw had taken close and careful note of each movement made by the Silver Sport, and now he imitated them from the very beginning.

Just as Sweepstakes Sam had frankly admitted when that first test was performed, this was "a new wrinkle" to him, used though he was to pretty nearly all sorts of feats of muscular display, and since the lesser athlete had performed the feat so smoothly, he felt sure he could hardly do better than by copying those movements from start to finish.

Justly proud though he was of his muscular powers, it was with an odd premonition of impending failure that Muldraw passed his huge arms under the two chairs, and securing his grip, paused for one full breath before attempting to lift the double weight.

But his eyes flashed viciously enough as he found the burden rising from the floor as he stiffened his muscles, and rose erect, holding the two men at arm's length, precisely as his antagonist had done before him; but, when he attempted to turn around before placing the chairs upon the bar, the catastrophe came!

"How'd fasht—ow-wow!" fairly howled Patsy McGlone, and first one and then the other of the two men toppled over, tearing the rounds from the Hercules's grip, in spite of his utmost efforts to restore that destroyed balance.

The Silver Sport had won; for both men and chairs fell to the sanded floor with a resounding crash, and for the space of a single breath there was complete silence on all sides, broken then by a savage curse and cry from the baffled mine-manager.

"Foul play!" he fairly roared in his fierce chagrin. "He leaned off his balance on purpose, and—Pat, you hound!"

"Divil a wan o' me fell ahntill Oi had to fahl, be gobs!" spluttered the Irishman, nimbly rolling over and over until he could scramble to his feet well out of Muldraw's reach.

"Judgment!" sharply cried the Silver Sport, who had retreated to the bar when that upset took place, and whose right hand now rested on his belt of arms. "Render judgment, Mr. Alderman!"

The proprietor of the Bullrushes was only waiting for just such an appeal, and instantly his decision was given:

"First test a stand-off, second test won by Samuel Singleton!" came his voice, so loud and clear that there could be no chance for disputing the terms in which he rendered his judgment.

No sooner did his voice cease, than a wild, enthusiastic cheer rose from the partisans of the Daisy Belle, almost as loudly cast back by cries from the other faction, and the curious seance bade fair to break up in a free-for-all fight, right then and there.

But this was just what the Man from Sweepstakes was most desirous of avoiding, and in commanding tones he called for peace and order.

"Be men, not wolves and wildcats! Come to order, one and all of you! This started out as a gentlemanly test of muscle between gentlemen; don't try to turn it into a dog-fight, unless—do you need still plainer talk, then?" as the tumult showed signs of breaking forth afresh.

"All right; here you have it, then! I'll lick the fellow who has the gall to chip in without waiting for an invitation! Now, put up or shut up!"

Bold talk for one man to fling into the teeth of so many, but Sam Singleton, shrewdly calculated upon the popularity he had just won to aid him in carrying his point, and he also felt that the two factions were too evenly divided for either side to venture the first blow.

Abner Howland came to the rescue at this moment, and sternly cried out:

"Fall back, all who belong to the Daisy Belle! If there's got to be a free fight, at least leave no doubt as to where it starts!"

This stern order was promptly obeyed by fully one-half of those present, now more than thrice as many as when Sweepstakes Sam first stepped over the threshold of the Bullrushes.

This, by separating the factions, served to quell that dangerous excitement in a goodly measure, and gave Muldraw a fairer chance to put in his excuse for his failure.

"All I ask of any man is to receive as square a deal as I give on my own part," he began, in more equable tones. "I'm not kicking against simple defeat, for I reckon I know how to give and take with the next man; but this much I maintain: I didn't have a fair shake. The fellows leaned different ways—Patsy to one side, and Nash backward.

"Up to that time I was holding my end level, but the devil himself couldn't expect to win with even the tools playing for the other side!"

"Isn't McGlone a Sure Thing man?" asked Howland.

"Yes, but—"

"Go easy, Mr. Muldraw," coldly interposed the Sport, before the mine-manager could say more. "Although I was watching your performance with all the eyes at my disposal, I failed to see anything of the awkwardness you allude to, and—"

"Is that giving me the lie, Mr. Singleton?"

"If I wished to give you the lie, sir, I'd follow it up with a bullet so mighty sudden that you wouldn't have time to put the question," came the swift retort. "What I started to say is just this:

"I'd rather suffer defeat than to have an adversary claiming my win came through an accident; so try it over with men of your own selection, sir."

Muldraw seemed taken aback by this totally unexpected offer, which was so different from anything he would have made had the situation been reversed; but he eagerly asked:

"Do you really mean that, sir?"

"Else I'd never have spoken the words, Mr. Muldraw. Pick your own men, and my only condition is that they shall be full grown, and of a weight to average with mine."

This was a politic stroke on the part of Silver Sam, for the cheer which arose at his generosity was not confined to one faction, but came equally from both, and even Muldraw showed signs of feeling as he gripped a hand warmly while saying:

"You're white as they make 'em, stranger, and if we didn't need all the men of that caliber we can scare up, cursed if I wouldn't own up beaten without trying any further!"

Nevertheless this sentiment did not hinder his making a careful selection for the second trial, and when his men stepped forward, it was with no room left for doubting their strong wish for the manager to at least equal the feat performed by the stranger in town.

But Sweepstakes Sam showed no signs of uneasiness for the ultimate result. Even should Muldraw succeed in duplicating the act, it would still remain a tie, with all to go over again, and by this time he had fairly taken the measure of his adversary.

So far as main strength was concerned, Muldraw was well nigh unequaled, but when dexterity was called for in addition, he was pretty sure to prove wanting.

Then, too, his nerve had not been strengthened by his recent mishap, and self-confidence is fully half the battle, as the Silver Sport was well aware from personal experience.

Taking all things into consideration, then, he fully anticipated a failure, and he was right!

Muldraw succeeded in lifting his picked men from the floor, but then his left arm failed, and that chair tipped over, giving its occupant an awkward fall, in spite of his strenuous effort to restore the lost equilibrium.

Muldraw dropped the other chair, brushing a trembling hand across his brow, where the great drops of sweat stood out like glassy beads.

"All done?" called out the judge, after a brief silence, during which all eyes were turned toward the defeated athlete. "Do you demand a third trial, Mr. Muldraw?"

"No. Give your decision."

"That can be but one thing: Samuel Singleton wins the second test, and with it the match!"

"That suits me, but, how is it with you, my friend?" asked the Man from Sweepstakes, soberly. "Are you fully satisfied?"

"I'll have to be, I reckon, for the present," came the gruff answer. "But, maybe you and I will meet again, Mr. Singleton, on evener footing than this last test gave me."

Sam Singleton abruptly drew back the half-extended hand with which he was waiting to greet his defeated antagonist, and the smile faded out of his handsome face as he spoke in turn:

"Am I to consider that as a threat, Mr. Muldraw?"

"No. Not a threat, but merely as a hint for the future," bluntly returned the Sure Thing manager, his eyes glowing with a reddish luster as they met that stern gaze.

Instantly the Sport's demeanor altered, and with all his customary coolness he retorted:

"That's not quite so bad, but it's only fair to warn you that I never *could* take a hint without it was accompanied by a kick, and *that*—well, only one poor devil tried it on, and he never knew what was the matter with the universe, after!"

"Eh? I don't—is it another joke, then?"

"Well, if a joke, he of the rash foot, aforementioned, never lived long enough to laugh over the point, and lest you might be tempted to play mule, just as he did—listen to my awful secret!"

Leaning forward until his lips almost touched the nearest ear of the puzzled, half-suspicious manager, Sweepstakes Sam uttered in a stage whisper, amply loud enough for every one in the saloon to catch:

"Don't give it away, dear fellow, but I never travel abroad without having a thick lining of dynamite stored away in the kicking department of my trousers, and hence the awful catastrophe!"

A general burst of laughter followed this absurd communication, and though Muldraw flushed hotly, he was obliged to join in under penalty of seeming still more ridiculous.

"Glad to hear the gay cackinnations which tell of joy unconfined," blandly declared the Silver Sport, bowing and gracefully waving both hands as though returning thanks to an applauding audience. "And now, having helped to clear away the dark, brooding clouds of war, what comes next on the docket?"

"A drink all 'round, on the house," promptly declared Moses, of the Bullrushes, slinging out a long line of glasses with the accurate dexterity which comes only of long practice. "All hands forward, or I'll fight the pile o' ye my own self!"

There was no refusing such a cordial invitation, and even the Silver Sport took a few drops of whisky in his glass, despite his recent assertion of total abstinence.

"This is one of the times that don't count, you understand," he said, in explanation, as Moses cast a quizzical glance his way. "Your decanters are not labeled, even if your cigar boxes are, and then, too, it isn't every day in the week that a fellow of my caliber can boast of having won the freedom of a town so unfortunately situated as Silverado is. And so—your pardon, sir?"

This came in response to a gentle tap on an arm, and Sam turned to see Abner Howland smiling grimly into his eyes as he said:

"Where do I and the Daisy Belle come in at, then, pardner?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A PATTERN SET FOR SWEEPSTAKES SAM.

RATHER oddly, perhaps, yet as a simple matter of fact, Sam Singleton had entirely forgotten the part which the Daisy Belle owner claimed in that struggle for independence, and for a moment or two he was taken fairly aback by this gentle reminder that his work was not yet complete.

A smile came into that wrinkled visage as Howland read something of this in those eyes, and he added:

"Not that I'm trying to crowd ye, stranger, or making a rush in before you've had full time to get back level after the hard work you've just been doing; but when you spoke that way—"

"Because I knew that if I waited much longer maybe I wouldn't be able to brag at all," cut in the Sport, with a light laugh. "You surely didn't think I'd forgotten you altogether, my dear sir?"

"Being of such little bigness, I didn't just know. It's easy to get overlooked unless a body keeps in motion, ye know," dryly added the mine-owner.

"Give him his dose, just as you measured it out to me, Singleton," rudely called out Milton Muldraw, by this time dressed and ready to part way down his defeat in a rimming glass of whisky at the expense of the judge who had decided against him with such seeming pleasure.

"If he does just that, sir, you'll never hear me bellowing for a new trial," promptly retorted Howland, with a sneer of open defiance.

"Not if I'm the one to try it against, anyway!"

"Peace, gentlemen!" quickly interposed Singleton, as he saw how dangerous such personalities might well become unless checked at once.

"If we can't get along without this eternal squabbling over trifles, I move that we all go down-cellar in a heap and have a cat-fight in the dark!"

This whimsical proposition produced a laugh, just as was intended, and as neither of the leaders really wished to come together in a fight which could end only in the death of one or both, the storm blew over, for the present at least.

In order to leave as little room as might be for a renewal, Singleton turned to Abner Howland, observing:

"Your time is mine, sir, and whenever you are ready for the test, be sure I'll not lag far behind. Only, may I ask what is your specialty for the occasion?"

For answer Howland drew a revolver, twirl-

ing it swiftly around, the forefinger which covered the trigger inside of its guard serving as a pivot.

There was a cold, almost cruel smile in his eyes and on his weather-beaten countenance as he spoke, deliberately:

"Well, stranger, I was never much for bigness, and don't make a practice of bragging heavy on my muscle. Even if I ever made any pretensions that way, the exhibition you made a bit ago would knock all such fool notions out of my head."

"A man is pretty much what nature sees fit to make him, I take it, Mr. Howland, and the best one I ever saw was a full inch shorter, and at least ten pounds lighter than I take you to be," politely declared the Man from Sweepstakes.

"But, excuse me for asking, what has all this to do with the question in hand?"

"Little or much, just as a body looks at it, I reckon," and that weapon ceased twirling and fell upon his left palm, there to revolve its cylinder with faint and musical clickings. "If nothing else, it gives the old man confidence to chin a bit in the presence of a company like this!"

"You are so modest and bashful—precisely me!" sighed Singleton. "Odd, isn't it, how great natures run in similar molds? Barring a few minor points which really aren't worth mentioning, a body might easily mistake us for twins!"

"That's all right if you only think so, my son, and I'm not going to kick because you take your laugh out in advance."

"While you'll come in later, when the laugh counts higher?"

"That may be, too, though you can't seem to think it, young man. Of course I don't pretend to equal you at feats of muscle; I'll frankly admit that I doubt if you have an equal, much less a superior, inside of a week's journey; but right here you see what makes old age and weak muscles fully the match for youth and vigor!"

Once more the revolver whirled around that pivotal forefinger, and there was a fire in those eyes that caused a grave, stern expression to show itself on Singleton's face.

"I trust you are not proposing a duel, Mr. Howland?"

The veteran laughed softly before replying: "Only of skill, my son. Even if you hadn't barred out all such nonsense, I'd take mighty good care not to propose anything through which either of us might go over the range."

"Thanks for so much, anyway."

"They don't belong to me, by rights, stranger," with a repetition of that peculiar chuckle. "Old and nearly worn out though I may look, I live life as well as the next fellow, and as for you—well, you're by far too valuable a recruit for the Daisy Belle to run the risk of losing those services through a regulation fight. Understand?"

"One thing: that you didn't forget to bring your nerve with you!"

"I never do," dryly added Howland, in no wise disturbed by that blunt insinuation. "And I reckon I'll need it all before I down Mr. Singleton, too."

"Two to one, in thousands, if hundreds or units are too small, that Singleton downs the Daisy Belle and all her following!" at this moment came the harsh tones of Muldraw, his offer clearly intended for Abner Howland.

But before any other voice could chip in, Sweepstakes Sam was facing the burly mine-manager, his face stern-set and his brown eyes all aglow as he cried out in answer:

"I'll take that bet, sir, and cover every one of the same sort which may be offered by any of the Sure Thing party!"

"But, man, dear, I'm betting on you to win!"

"And I will win—every bet you dare put up on my downing the Daisy Belle!"

Muldraw was plainly taken aback by this totally unexpected bluff, but if he found fitting words difficult, not so some of his more rabid supporters.

"He's already a Daisy Belle!"

"A put-up job, or I'm a liar!"

"Why proclaim what all Silverado knows to be a scandalous fact, Joe Clipstone?" contemptuously retorted Howland to the last speaker. "I stand ready to bear witness that you are a liar from headwaters!"

"Pray permit me to edge in a word or two before this matter goes any further," coldly interposed the Silver Sport. "I wear no man's collar, as yet, save my own. I fought the best I knew against the champion of the Sure Thing, simply because I wished to retain that very independence as long as possible."

"Wasn't I offering to bet odds that you'd hold it against the Daisy Belle as well?" gruffly demanded Muldraw.

"Not through love for me, nor for the mere sake of winning, though," came the keen retort.

"And right there I draw the line, and draw it so deep that a blind man ought to be able to see it with both eyes shut!"

"Of course I can't prevent you fellows from betting if you still insist on so doing after this fair warning; but I'll lose myself if I can't make you lose any other way!"

Even Muldraw had nothing to say after this blunt threat, and no further offers were made of money or money's worth.

But from the Sure Thing division there did come ugly mutterings, and even low words which still further irritated the stranger who apparently stood alone, like a tempting morsel between two dogs, coveted by both, yet saved for the moment by the very hatred they felt each for the other.

Perhaps it would have been the wiser part to ignore all this, and hasten forward the test of skill which still remained, but, after all, Samuel Singleton was a very human man, and he could not refrain from cutting back.

"Don't forget that there may be such a thing as a hereafter, my friend! So far I've been all for peace and amity. To avoid a worse row I consented to meet the picked man of each faction in friendly test, on their own grounds."

"I did meet one, and you saw for yourself how we came out. I now stand ready to meet the next, and win or lose, I'll accept the decision like a white man. But, I say, I haven't taken all this trouble to have it spoiled through your hot-headed folly—or worse!"

"And so, here you have it, too plain for mistaking. If there is any betting openly made as to the result of the coming contest between Mr. Howland and myself, or any other attempt to rouse up hard feelings between the two factions over my doings, I pledge my sacred word of honor to make it cost those who offend just as heavily as possible!"

All this came in such frank, manly fashion that even Muldraw could not find the cheek to stick it out longer, and making the best of a bad bargain, he spoke up:

"That's all right, and I'm eating my offer, Singleton. You downed another man. So let it pass, and go on with rat-killing!"

Sweepstakes Sam bowed to the speaker, smiling as he read the truth back of this feigned submission. Muldraw had not given up all hopes of winning such a valuable recruit for the Sure Thing, and for that chance he was willing to bow his head for the time being.

Through all this the elder Howland had been waiting in silence, but his pistol remained in his right hand, and his keen eyes were taking close notes of everything; and as Sam turned his way, he saw enough to satisfy himself that in case of a row with any of Muldraw's gang, he could at least count on one valuable backer.

"Awaiting your pleasure, Mr. Howland," was his salutation. "I think the conditions of our little agreement gave you the privilege of taking the initiative?"

"That means you're waiting for me to set you a pattern to copy?"

"Or attempt to copy, rather put it," bowed the Sport.

"That's what I'd rather say, for a fact, but I've seen enough of you this morning to fight shy of bragging in advance," grimly observed the wiry little mine-owner; then turning to the bar to add: "Give me an old card, Moses; any one will answer my purpose as a starter."

Alderman quickly supplied that want, and with the card in his hand, Howland left the saloon, followed by all the company, each member of the two factions feeling by far too strong an interest in the outcome to risk losing a single move in the game.

Howland crossed the street and paused in front of a closed and empty shanty which stood directly opposite the Bullrushes. Glancing back as though taking measure of the distance, the mine-owner stuck the playing-card against that unpainted door by means of a pin, then retraced his steps, looking to his pistols as he did so.

"The deuce!" ejaculated Singleton, glancing at the card and noting its value. "Are you going to turn it into an eight-spot, Mr. Howland?"

"Well, I really hadn't thought of that, pardner, but we'll let that wait for another trial. I'm not going to hit you too hard at the send-off, for fear of discouraging you so early in the game."

"How very considerate you are, to be sure!"

"I was born that way, pardner, and I'm glad you like my style," was the veteran's rejoinder, adding: "Please count half a dozen for me, will you? I'll do the same favor for you, when it comes to your turn."

"Firing at the word, is it? All right! If I don't give you a square deal, just call a halt and begin all over, after kicking me for a simpleton."

"Not unless you take the lining out of your trousers, though!"

Both men seemed as merry as they were full of confidence, and this contest promised to be far more amicably conducted than the first one had been.

Taking his position, Howland asked for the word, at the same time twirling his weapon around his forefinger, precisely as he had done while in the saloon, and as the first word came, the butt touched his palm and the weapon exploded.

Sweepstakes Sam counted at ordinary speed, possibly bearing in mind the fact that, later on, Howland would be serving him in the same

capacity, and at each sharply spoken number, there came a shot, until Abner Howland had emptied his revolver.

Without wasting a look at his target, the mine-owner sprung his gun open to cast out the empty shells, at the same time observing:

"Just a sample of rough and ready work as a starter, Mr. Singleton."

Then a cheer arose from the Daisy Belle partisans.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHARPSHOOTING SPORT.

SAM SINGLETON was at no loss to account for those sounds of triumph, for with all his seeming carelessness he had taken note of each shot as it was fired, and could have called its position within the fraction of an inch before the next number passed his lips.

But it was no part of his programme to betray this watchfulness, and so he crossed the street and paused in front of the target, counting the bullet-holes as though to make sure none of the lead had gone astray.

"All accounted for, and never an edge of the paper broken," was his report, as he started back, pausing when near the middle of the road to stoop and pick up a number of stray pebbles which lay there in great plenty.

"How many did you find that struck outside of the card, sir?" asked Howland, with something akin to a sneer in voice and upon face as he leisurely recharged his weapon.

"Never a one, of course," answered Singleton, stopping short in real or admirably feigned surprise. "Did you think you had missed a mark of that bigness, pardner?"

"Well, hardly! 'Twas your thought I was thinking of, sir."

"Wasted powers, my dear fellow! I could have called your shots as you made them, and I was merely making sure the door held no old bullet-holes which might give your fellows an excuse for kicking when I came to copy your pattern."

"We'll bar that by putting up a fresh card," announced Howland, taking one from his pocket as he spoke.

But Sam was not listening, just then. He drew one of his pistols, cocking the weapon as he tossed a small pebble into the air, almost directly over his head, catching sight with the swiftness of thought.

As the sharp report rung out, the pebble shot off at an abrupt angle, and the battered lead whistled viciously through the air.

Before its weird scream could entirely die away, another bit of stone was tossed up, to be treated after the same fashion. Then a third, fourth, fifth, sixth, until the revolver was empty, and each shot had sped true to its moving mark!

"Clean score, by glory!" loudly cried Muldraw, who would almost have sacrificed a hand rather than see Abner Howland succeed where he himself had failed. "There's a pattern even Crack-shot Ab needn't be ashamed to imitate—if he can!"

"Tain't his turn until he copies the fu'st pattern, though!" cried out one of the Daisy Belle partisans, in hasty protest.

But Abner Howland scorned to avail himself of such a subterfuge, and bluntly demanded:

"Is that what you rest your freedom on, pardner?"

Sam was recharging his weapon, but glanced up in wide-eyed surprise that such a question should be deemed necessary.

"That? Oh, you mean the pebbles?"

"What else would I mean, then?"

"Why, man, dear, I was merely unloading my gun. Those shells have been in for good six months past, and of course I wouldn't try to do even such rough, off-hand shooting as you showed me, without fresh charges."

"And he always uses weenty bits of sand when he draws his loads!" boisterously laughed Muldraw.

"Well, not always," candidly admitted the Silver Sport, with a bland smile as he came forward. "Only when in town, where people are lying around reckless, and merely as a hint to dodge lively if the howls come their way through unlucky chance, you understand?"

"I understand that it's a mighty unlucky chance that hindered me from backing up my choice with solid rocks!" declared Muldraw, now in the best of spirits, for he felt that his hated rival was surely doomed to share the defeat which had befallen him not long before.

"It isn't too late yet," began Howland, a hand seeking the pocket where he kept his loose change; but before he could say more, he was almost sternly checked by Singleton, with the question:

"Are you trying to win this match through my defaulting, sir?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Then don't forget that all betting is barred when it takes in me or my actions, Mr. Howland. And you," turning even more sternly toward the Sure Thing manager, "drop all such offers, sir, unless you are really determined to try my skill as a snap shot!"

This was very plain speech, but the Silver

Sport clearly meant precisely what he said, and even Muldraw hardly cared to resent that thinly veiled challenge just then.

"All right, Mr. Singleton. I'll simmer down and say no more until after you've given him a full sup out of the cup you held to my lips a bit ago."

"Then I'll be ready to both hear and talk back, never you doubt it, Muldraw," significantly declared the owner of the Daisy Belle, and without waiting for an answer, he crossed the street and pinned up a second card; then returned in readiness to give the word as it had been given for him.

"All ready, whenever you are, Mr. Singleton."

"And I never keep a man waiting when I know it," was the reply as the Silver Sport faced his target. "All ready, pardner!"

The first number came quickly, but Sam was not to be caught napping; his weapon exploded, shot following shot in perfect time with the numbers, the weapon whirling around true as a machine, smoothly as though turned by the same tongue that was giving the signal.

There was no need for Howland to cross the street to know where those bits of lead had struck, although a less practiced eye might easily have blurred those six holes, they were planted so closely together, almost in the center of the card!

In spite of his undoubted nerve, Howland could not cover all traces of his acute chagrin, and Sam laughed softly as his keen eyes took note of that evident discomfiture.

"Sorry for you, my good friend, but you chanced to hit one of my few sure points in your selection."

"Well, you've got it down mighty fine, for a fact," admitted the mine-owner, with a fairly good grace. "Where did you pick it up, if it's a fair question?"

"Learned it as a cowboy, and spent many an idle hour practicing the trick while playing Texan Ranger," coolly answered the sharpshooting stranger from Sweepstakes.

Although Howland had not thought it necessary to cross the street to note those shots more closely, others had greater curiosity, and among their number was Muldraw. And he was prompt enough in making known a fact which gave him double gratification, too.

"Bested at his own game, by glory! Singleton's six shots don't cover as much space as any four of Howland's!"

"Spare your lungs, Mr. Muldraw," sharply retorted the Sport. "We weren't shooting string-measure, and as Mr. Howland hit the mark with all of his shots, the best I can claim is a draw. Are you willing to call it that, pardner?"

"Yes. I'd be a fool if I wasn't," frankly declared Howland, fairly won over by that manly speech. "Maybe you'll down me anyway, but if you do, I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that I met defeat at the hands of a gentleman."

"Ditto to ditto," genially cried the Sport. "But, we mustn't burn too much daylight over trifles, eh? Shall I take my turn in setting up a pattern, pardner?"

"It's your right, under the agreement, of course."

"Then I'll exercise it, if I can find—The very thing, and not far to look for it, either! Surely I'm in a streak of luck to-day, and that's a bad streak for you, pardner!"

With a light laugh, Sweepstakes Sam picked up an empty ten-gallon whisky keg which stood near the front door of the Bullrushes, and with one finger crooked inside the open bung-hole, carried it across the street to the empty house which had served as backstop for the shots fired at the two cards.

Standing the keg on end before that same door, with apparent carelessness, but in reality closely estimating the distance away from the building, Singleton then drew his knife and thrust its point deep into the head of the keg, with the keen edge turned toward the Bullrushes.

Abner Howland was closely watching these movements, trying to guess what manner of test the stranger was thinking of, but as he saw the use made of that knife, he broke forth in a half-sneer:

"Splitting bullets, is it, pardner? Well, maybe your younger eyes have the odds on my old peepers at that sort of game, but—we'll see which is what, maybe!"

Sweepstakes Sam was rising erect as that call came, and deliberately measuring off fifteen full paces in the direction of the mine-owner, he made answer:

"Splitting bullets it is, my dear sir; have you any serious objections to make to my selection, then?"

"Not to say objections, only I looked for something a good bit harder. I've split a peck, more or less, and I never served as cowboy or Texan Ranger, either!"

Sam made a mark with his heel at the end of the fifteen paces, then sent back the words:

"All right, and something harder goes! I'm one of the most accommodating fellows you ever saw, when you don't try to rub me against the grain."

He moved back to where keg and knife were resting, and producing a notebook, tore from it a leaf, which he divided into four equal bits.

Two of these he pinned against the door, back of the knife, using no particular pains in placing them, so far as could be told by those whose eyes were closely noting his movements; then returning to the score which his heel had made in the gravelly road, drew one of his revolvers and giving it a leisurely inspection remarked:

"As you insinuated, Mr. Howland, splitting bullets at fifteen paces is an early letter in the alphabet of sharpshooting, but when you add a trifle or two to it, even a good shot need not be ashamed to devote an odd minute or so to the practice."

"For instance: you see those two bits of white paper?"

"I see them, yes. What of it?"

"Well, just keep on watching them, and possibly you may see something more!"

Sweepstakes Sam deliberately raised his pistol to a level, taking slow and careful aim, watched with almost breathless interest by the crowd.

Then the cartridge exploded sharply.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SILVER SPORT ON TOP.

A BREATHLESS silence followed that shot, which lasted probably for the space of half a score seconds; not longer; but then a wild, bull-like roar burst from the lungs of Muldraw, and flinging high his hat, the mine-manager met it with a mighty kick as it came sailing downward once more.

"Something harder! Oh, do give me something harder!"

Sam instantly shifted his position for one which placed himself directly between the two men, and the swift look he caught from Abner Howland's eyes told that his purpose was divined by that one at least.

"No need, sir!" came in low tones from the Daisy Belle owner. "I won't, and he da'sen't, though it'll come to a scrap sooner or later, as you can see for yourself."

There was opportunity for no further talk, just then, for all was excitement and confusion among the witnesses to that test of skill.

Although every step taken by the Sport had been carefully noted by the partisans of both Lodes, it is safe to say that of them all not one could have exactly described the feat the stranger intended to perform; but now their wondering eyes told them what had been done; and an outburst in which local rivalry was almost forgotten greeted the result.

Not satisfied with what they could see from their first positions, a rush was started toward the deserted building—at which the Silver Sport saw his time for interfering had come, and as his sternly warning voice rung forth, each one of his hands gripped the butt of a cocked revolver.

"Steady, all hands! Keep back, unless you really want me to build up a fence with you for rails!"

That instinctive rush was checked on the instant, although but few of the men could do better than guess at his full meaning. But that check was sufficient to let the Silver Sport push in his real reasons.

"Don't forget that this is something more than childish sport, my good people, even if there aren't any dollars at stake. There must be no room left for dispute or opportunity for crying out foul play for one side or the other, so stand back everybody until after the chosen judge has rendered his verdict."

"That's all right, but who is to act as judge?" asked Muldraw.

"Will you oblige me by crossing over and taking a look for yourself, Mr. Howland?" gravely asked Singleton, with a little bow toward the owner of the Daisy Belle.

It was a graceful tribute, neatly rendered, but just then Abner Howland was hardly capable of acknowledging it in fitting manner.

If there was one thing on which he prided himself more than another, it was his proficiency with fire-arms, whether rifle, shotgun or pistol; and long as he had been in Silverado, his supremacy in that line had never failed, though often tested.

But, his eyes warned him what was true, yet he could not wholly believe it, and with a dim hope that a closer inspection might alter matters if only a trifle, he crossed the street and bent down to inspect that odd target.

Sam had performed his self-set feat with startling accuracy; first splitting the bullet on the edge of the knife with such exquisite accuracy that the two halves shot off at the same angle, and cut through both bits of paper which he had so carefully pinned against the door!

Abner Howland stared at the triple target for the space of half a minute without word or motion.

There was the full proof before his very eyes, yet even now it seemed impossible of full belief.

"Anything lacking there, pardner?" called out the Silver Sport in cheery tones.

"Not nigh so much as I wish there was," answered back the mine-owner, drawing away

from that superb target, and moving toward the firing stand once more.

"Then it's a copy you'll not blush at following, sir?"

Howland made no immediate response to this innocently malicious query, but pausing in front of the speaker, gazed steadily into his big brown eyes for several moments. Then he said:

"I've tried it on twice already, stranger, and slipped up on it just as often, but maybe there is a charm about the third time trying, after all."

"Which means?"

"That I'll own up beaten on the square at my best hold, and give you any sum you see fit to value your services at, if you'll agree on your part to stand by the Daisy Belle until this trouble over the Twin Lodes has been settled in one way or another."

"And the Sure Thing will double those figures, let them climb up as high as they may!" instantly chipped Milton Muldraw, true to the interests of the faction which he was representing just then.

The Man from Sweepstakes would have been either more or less than human had he not felt a touch of pride at finding himself valued so highly, almost extravagantly indeed; and under slightly different circumstances he doubtless would have amused himself by pitting these two enthusiastic bidders against each other, if only to see how high he might run his price.

But he had spoken only the simple truth when he declared that he could not regard himself as a free agent, and feeling himself bound in honor of his yet-absent friend, this persistent trying to involve him still more deeply in that purely local fight, stirred up his anger instead.

"There surely must be something the matter with my organs of speech to-day, gentlemen," he said, sedately. "I know that I tried my level best to make everybody present understand that I am *not* on sale, but I must have made a worse botch of it than I usually do when I try to talk plain United States, since here you two fellows are coming back at me once more."

"It only shows how highly we value your services, sir."

"Then make your right to claim them against my will, so that all hands will back you up in it, sir!" sternly retorted the Silver Sport, and with a gesture toward the opposite building, he added: "There is my pattern, Mr. Howland, and if you are so crazy to capture an unwilling recruit, all you have to do is to better that!"

"If I thought it *could* be bettered, would I stop to talk this way?" half-ruefully asked the mine-owner.

"Then you admit yourself vanquished?"

"Not until I actually have to, stranger," came the answer, as the veteran toed the mark first drawn by his more youthful antagonist with the revolvers.

"That's hearty, and if any other person was interested, I'd pull for your winning with all my heart! Shall I replace the bits of paper, or would you rather do that yourself?"

"Neither, unless you object to my using yours. You might forget at just what distance apart to pin them, and I'm mighty sure I wouldn't know the way if I was to study a solid week!"

Sam laughed lightly at this double-edged remark, but let it pass without retort, stepping back in order to leave the marksman at full liberty, calling out:

"Attention, gentlemen all! No disturbance now, or somebody will get it right in the neck! Take your time, Mr. Howland."

That final sentence was a waste of words. The mine-owner meant to do just that, for he knew that on his next shot depended the supremacy as a pistol-prince, which title had so long been his without dispute.

If he could tie this wonderful target, he would be able to begin all over again, and then he would not make the mistake of undervaluing his adversary, as he had done when he set his first pattern.

He chose his favorite gun for the critical shot, and took ample time in assuring himself that he was exactly facing that steel edge, for he knew not just how much might depend upon that precaution. In sober truth he was confronted by an entirely strange problem, without time or power to thoroughly master its details.

Twice his weapon rose, only to sink again without the trigger being pulled, for this sort of shooting was far from being after his fancy. It called for deliberate aiming, or dwelling on one's aim, while he was a snap-shot, almost by nature.

"Comes sort of awkward, pardner," he said, apologetically, glancing toward the Silver Sport. "I shoot on the rise or the drop, as a rule, but this won't suit, I'm thinking. So—here she goes!"

For the third time Abner Howland lifted his weapon, dwelling on his aim as carefully as one might whose very life hung in the balance, and when he felt that he could not possibly better his aim, the trigger was steadily drawn, the hammer fell, the shell exploded.

Swift as thought, the veteran marksman

ducked his head downward and to one side, in order to clear that little cloud of blue smoke; then a low execration burst from his lips, for even so soon he saw that he surely had failed!

"After us is manners, gentlemen," sharply cried Sweepstakes Sam, then adding: "Come and help me judge, Howland, will you?"

"Didn't you hear him confess judgment?" cried Muldraw, far too full of triumph to hold in longer.

"We're neither of us taking your word for it, luckily," retorted Singleton, who had taken an intense dislike to this burly fellow. "Come, Mr. Howland, and let's see if we have all this nonsense to begin over again."

In sullen silence the mine-owner complied with that touch, reloading the empty chamber as he crossed over to the deserted building, but showing an almost utter lack of curiosity in the matter now.

"There's one of your marks, anyway," said Singleton, a finger pointing to where a second ragged hole marred the right hand bit of paper.

"One isn't two, though."

"No, but your second bit may be covering mine, for I've known stranger things than that to happen," declared the Sport, his voice almost unconsciously taking on a consoling tone as he bent closer to the second bit of paper."

But Howland spared him the trouble of further investigation on that score, by silently pointing out a little scratch several inches to the left of that piece of paper, where the freshness of the wood told the tale too plainly for dispute.

Abner Howland had split his bullet, for a fact, but into such unequal portions that his failure seemed only more pronounced through that very modicum of success.

The Sure Thing manager had followed them across the street, and as he saw this silent admission of defeat, another mocking laugh broke forth, heedless of the repeated warnings which had been given him.

Losing his highly prized reputation as the crack shot of that section was bitter enough in itself, but to be triumphed over by a rival to whom he owed so little good-will as he did to Milton Muldraw, was more than human flesh and blood could bear, and Abner Howland burst bonds after a dangerous fashion.

He tore the marked bits of paper from the door, wet them with his tongue, then stuck the pieces on his cheeks as he faced his enemy with eyes that fairly blazed, and a voice that sounded harsh and strained:

"Fix yourself up the same way, you howler, and play that your nose was a knife-blade, as I'm doing; step off your own distance, and give the word to suit yourself. Then we'll see who can score the highest!"

It was an odd, even whimsical proposition for one man to make to another, but there could be no doubting the perfect earnestness with which it came from those lips. But the Man from Sweepstakes once more sprung into the breach, and pushing both men further apart, he sternly cried:

"Drop it, I tell you both! This is my patent, and I'll let no man infringe upon it until he has first won the right by downing me for all time! As for you, Mr. Muldraw—"

"My nose is not built that way, so you need have no fear for my accepting such a ridiculous challenge."

"Then why invite it, sir?"

"I deny that I did invite it. I couldn't help laughing, but that was simply because I saw another good man downed—just as I met defeat before him."

This explanation came with seeming good humor, and as the manager turned away without waiting for a reply, Sam Singleton was willing enough on his side to let the dispute rest right where it was, and turning once more toward Howland, he coldly said:

"We'll settle our little affair first, sir. Are you satisfied, or do you demand another trial before admitting yourself defeated?"

Howland motioned toward the bullet-scarred door, and no words were necessary to supplement that gesture. He admitted his defeat.

Before either man could speak again, there came the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs, and then a startled yell broke from the crowd, while one of their number cried aloud:

"Holy smoke! A dead man in the saddle!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SWEEPSTAKES SAM'S PARD.

THE street on which the Bullrushes was located, led almost directly in a line with the stage road as it came across the river beyond which lay the Flume, and it was from that direction the rapid hoof-strokes came, and almost as soon as heard, sight was caught of the horse and rider.

Wet with sweat as though from a long and a hard race, the flying animal still betrayed unusual fright, and its rider was doing naught toward checking that reckless pace.

He lay forward in the saddle, one arm dangling helplessly in sight, the other hidden beneath his breast as though that hand was still gripping horn or mane, yet there seemed good foundation for that startled cry; it indeed looked as though a corpse was on horseback!

The Man from Sweepstakes for a brief space stared at that strange rider like one petrified through some intense emotion. Then—

"Heavens above! Stop him! It's my pard!"

Hardly knowing what words passed his lips, so intense was his surprise at that recognition, the Silver Sport sprung forward with wondrous speed, dashing straight for the head of the runaway, heedless of the risk he was thereby incurring, thinking only of saving the friend he loved as one should love a brother.

Seemingly blind through terror of some description, the horse kept straight on its way without swerving, and then, leaping true for its head, grasping the bit with one hand while his other arm caught at that limp and seemingly lifeless form, Sweepstakes Sam effected the rescue before another of that assembly could reach the spot.

But, even as his strong arm lifted the man from the saddle, signs of life were given, and a husky cry of recognition came from those pale lips:

"Sam! Thank the Lord!"

"Look to the horse, some of you fellows!" cried the rescuer, as he staggered clear with his burden. "Mack, old boy?"

"Right side up—with care, pardner!"

The new-comer felt his feet, and would have stood alone only for the firm grip of the Silver Sport, who just then saw something which drew a cry of angry solicitude from his lips.

"Blood! You're hurt, man! Who did it?"

"Major Hold-up and his infernal gang; but don't—"

His voice choked up, and his newly-found strength seemed to leave him all at once. Only those friendly arms kept him from falling at full length, yet even then a faint expression as of fierce gratification came into his dusty, blood-marked face as he caught the cry of execration which the mention of that hated title brought forth from fully one-half of that excited assemblage.

As Sam gently lowered his friend to the ground, in order to the more readily examine into his bodily condition, he caught his breath sharply, for those dusty garments were stained here and there with fresh blood, and from that abrupt collapse he feared the very worst.

Mack Wilson had kept the appointment made with his pard, but it looked as though he had met his death while doing so!

"Water—whisky—fetch it, somebody!" the Silver Sport cried. "Quick! for love of Heaven, get a hustle on, can't you?"

For the first time since he came prominently before the citizens of Silverado, Sam Singleton showed signs of losing his nerve, but that very weakness gained him more friends than had all his coolness before, for they were swift to recognize the friend and true pard.

All else seemed forgotten in this strange coming to town, and little else was done while the Sport from Sweepstakes was trying to restore the sinking senses of his friend. Doubtless curiosity had something to do with this intense interest, but true sympathy was not lacking, for all.

The horse had given little trouble after once feeling the strong hand of a master, and was now being cared for by one of the citizens, a hand soothing him even while the care-taker eagerly watched the pards and waited with the rest for an explanation as to the part played by the notorious road-agent in this affair.

While restoratives were being brought from the Bullrushes, Sam hastily opened the garments worn by his friend, and made a rapid examination of his person, giving vent to a great gasp of relief as he failed to find what he so unwillingly sought: a mortal wound.

Hurts were there, caused by shots which had certainly been fired to kill, but which had done no more than inflict flesh-wounds, trifling in themselves, but producing a copious flow of blood, no doubt greatly increased by that wild ride down the Flume to town.

"Only grazes, thank Heaven! How do you feel, pard?" as Wilson opened his eyes, suddenly lifting his head and shoulders through a fit of coughing born of that fiery liquor which a too-generous hand had administered.

"I'm—all right!" came the sturdy reply. "Never mind me—go for him—that devil from Hades!"

"It's you first, pardner," returned Sam, resisting that rash effort to arise as yet. "Wait until—is there never a doctor in this infernal town?"

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" came a cheery call, as a fairly well-dressed personage pressed through that assembly.

"One of Major Hold-up's victims, Doc," promptly answered Muldraw, who apparently had forgotten all unfriendly sentiments in this unexpected happening. "Brace him up as quick as skill will let ye, for maybe he can give us the chance we've been hoping for so long!"

"Make him tell when and where he was held up, Doc!"

"Spit'er out, stranger, an' mebbe we kin easy ye up 'long of fetchin' the p'izen critter fer a healin' plaster!"

Doctor Heddens required no such incentive, for the mere sight of a suffering mortal was

quite sufficient to set him to work, and recognizing a competent hand in this new-comer, Sam Singleton gave way without a word of questioning.

But the wounded man himself was less tractable, for with reviving senses returned a fierce hatred and intense longing for vengeance, such as only a strong-willed man can experience.

"Wait—him first!" he huskily cried, shrinking from the friendly hands of the physician. "Sam—that devil—go find!"

"If you mean Major Hold-up, where did he jump you, sir?" asked Abner Howland, seeming to feel quite as strong an interest in the matter as did his rival of the Sure Thing. "Just give us a hint to work on, and we'll be going for the Major while your pard is tending to you."

"I'm all right—go for him, pard! On the road—they jumped me just where two trees crossed—"

"The Bridal Pair, by glory!"

"I had one gun—I hit him—my meat!"

Mack Wilson uttered these words with strange emphasis, his eyes fixed upon the face of his friend and plainly trying to say what as yet his lips were unable through faintness.

"You want me to find him?" asked the Silver Sport.

"Yes! Find him—his body!" gasped the injured man, once more striking back the hand which sought to aid him. "He fell—don't let—go, if true pard of mine!"

At that moment, abandoning all hope of gaining further information from the strangely agitated stranger, Muldraw raised a loud cry for volunteers, adding:

"It's not so far to the Bridal Pair but we can afford to take the trip on a chance of catching the hounds, my lads! Get your long guns and come back just a-whooping, for I'll lead you a merry race for it if I have had all my tail-feathers pulled out o' me!"

At the same time Abner Howland was rallying his friends, for, of course, it would never do to let the Sure Thing crowd take all the glory there might come of such an affair, and in less than another minute the doctor and the two pards were almost the only persons left on the ground.

As Mack Wilson saw this ready rush to carry out his wishes, it seemed to give him fresh strength and calmness, for, while submitting to the hands of the medical man, he spoke with much greater coherency to his friend, urging him to join the party which was forming.

"They jumped me, just when I thought all danger was past, but I gave 'em the best I had with me, and then—he took a tumble!"

"You mean Major Hold-up, Mack?"

"Yes. Go find him! Go see that no trick—fetch cold meat! That's my man!"

Dr. Heddens was a rapid worker, and one who had served a long apprenticeship to gunshot wounds, hence he was but a very few minutes in completing that preliminary examination.

"You can leave him with perfect safety, sir," came his answer to that anxious look. "It's nothing worse than loss of blood, combined with unusual excitement."

"He's right, and I'd go myself, only—say you will go fetch?"

With this opinion to back up his own belief, Sam Singleton felt less reluctance about leaving his injured friend to join the party of man-hunters, and after a few words whispered into his ear by Wilson, while Dr. Heddens good-naturedly stood aloof by request, his final scruple was overcome, and when the Muldraw-Howland force began to show up, ready for their dash after the road-agents, Sam was likewise on deck.

He had given the horse on which Mack Wilson had ridden into Silverado a hasty examination, finding that the beast bore several marks of wildly aimed shots, but nothing to disable it, or even to give it much annoyance now that its fright had been overcome.

With a last word to his pard, whom Dr. Heddens had promised to take to the Blossom House, Singleton rode away on the war-path once more.

It seemed perfectly natural for him to keep closer to Abner Howland than to Milton Muldraw, after the dealings he had held with the two men, and it was from the lips of the wrinkled veteran that he heard just why the spot so imperfectly described by Mack Wilson had been so quickly recognized.

And when Howland spoke of the two huge pine trees which formed a living arch across the stage road some two or more miles beyond the head of the Flume, Singleton remembered having taken notice of them when coming over the road with Jolly Dick Blue the day before.

"A poetical sort of cuss took a notion the trees were hugging each other, ye see, and so he called 'em that," explained Howland, with a touch of cynicism in both voice and face. "And so it's been 'The Bridal Pair' ever since."

A goodly portion of the party were mounted, but thanks to the Flume and other natural difficulties which liberally marked that portion of the trail, those afoot had but little difficulty in keeping well along in company with their better supplied fellows.

All were well armed, and not one among the lot but what seemed more than eager for a hot

brush with the road-agents, against whom many an ugly stroke had been recorded before this latest outrage.

As they hastened forward with what speed they could command, Sam was given a fairly complete history of Major Hold-up, as far as he and his gang had figured in that immediate section; but still he was at a loss to understand just why Mack Wilson had betrayed such fierce eagerness to have his "cold meat" found and brought in.

When the company drew nearer to the Bridal Pair, word was passed along for closing up, although even the most sanguine there could hardly say they expected to find the road-agents still in that vicinity.

Still, Major Hold-up had given more than one proof of bold audacity and almost matchless nerve, and the two leaders were not men to risk a fiasco through taking too much for granted.

Singleton was one of the half-dozen who struck on ahead to reconnoiter, and his keen eyes were the ones to catch the first sign.

There on a gray rock were spots of blood, hardly yet thoroughly dried by air and sun!

A brisk search was made, as a matter of course, but no dead men were to be discovered anywhere in the immediate vicinity of the Bridal Pair, although other bloody signs were found, here and there, with what almost surely was a trail where dead or wounded outlaws had been carried away from the stage road.

"We'll never have a fairer chance to wipe the hell-hounds out, once for all," vigorously cried Muldraw, to whom this last discovery was due. "I say follow to the bitter end! Who is with me in this?"

There was no lack of volunteers, from among the Daisy Belle contingent as well as his own particular following; but as he spoke, his gaze singled out his late antagonist.

"I'll give one hundred dollars apiece for all the bodies you can find and fetch in," spoke up the Silver Sport. "I don't know *why*, but my hurt pard wants his game, and wants it *bad*! Wish I could stay with you, but there *he* is—and I'm duty bound to look after him first."

Without waiting for comment or answer, Singleton rode away.

CHAPTER XVII.

SWEEPSTAKES SAM'S PARD EXPLAINS.

DURING that ride back to town, Samuel Singleton did a vast deal of hard thinking, yet with anything but satisfactory results.

What had delayed the coming of Mack Wilson so much later than the hour named by himself when he made that distant appointment?

Why did he betray such fierce, almost unnatural rancor against the road-agent chief? For, knowing his pard so thoroughly, Sam knew that something more than mere revenge for a robber's assault lay back of his wish to secure the body of Major Hold-up.

Was it to help him in a still-hunt after this notorious outlaw that Mack Wilson had asked for that meeting?

These troublesome questions gave Singleton ample food for reflection to last him all the way to Silverado, yet when he drew rein in front of the Blossom House, he was just as far from a satisfactory solution of the mystery as at first.

Calling to a ragged youth who was slouching near, the Silver Sport gave him the jaded animal to take to some place where it could receive the attention it deserved, quickening his wits with a goodly bit of silver, then springing to the door, where the landlord was watching his coming.

"Where's Doc and the gentleman he—"

"Up-stairs in your room," came the anticipatory answer. "Leastways the gent is, but Doc—"

Landlord Blossom spared his breath, for Sam had brushed past him with scant ceremony, and was already nearly at the top of that steep flight of stairs.

An eager cry greeted him as he opened the chamber door, and Mack Wilson rose to a sitting posture on the bed where he had been resting, both hands going out for a warm grip, but a look of disappointment coming into his eyes the instant he sighted the face of his pard.

"You didn't find it—him, then, Sam?"

"No, but I set a pack on their trail with an offer of big pay to help spur them on. If there's anything to be found, they'll fetch it in before the hunt is cried off, old man."

Mack Wilson sunk back on the bed and covered his face from view, but that was not born of physical weakness as Sam thought at first. In truth the wounded man had rallied after a wonderful fashion, as he soon made evident.

While covertly examining his pard, Singleton gave a brief description of that brisk dash over the stage-trail, and when he came to speak of those bloody marks, Mack Wilson plucked up, sitting up on the bed despite the gentle expostulations of his friend.

"That's not what's the matter with me, Sam," declared the injured man, with a trace of impatience in his tones, yet his eyes betraying something of the strong affection which bound them together—a bond which kindred blood could not

have rendered deeper, stronger, or purer. "The doctor gave me a thorough looking over, and declared that all I lack now is a few quarts of blood. If you'd only brought back that devil, dead or alive, I'd dance you down in a jolly jig over his carcass!"

Sam was relieved in a measure, though not yet entirely convinced that fever from wounds did not have something to do with this remarkable rallying, the contrast was so great.

Only a little more than a couple of hours before, Mack Wilson had looked and acted like a dying mortal, while now—surely this strength must be at least partly factitious?

But Mack Wilson insisted to the contrary when his pard betrayed the anxiety he strove to veil, and ere long Sweepstakes Sam found himself accepting that same view of the case.

Wilson showed a greater desire to talk of the road-agents and his deferred hopes, however, and made Singleton repeat what had been noted at the spot where the ambushade had been sprung.

"I know that I caught the drop! I saw him throw up his hands and reel like a drunken fool! I could find him, if— Oh, for just ten hours of my old-time strength!"

Mack Wilson gave a savage gesture, then once again buried his face in the hot pillow, Sam watching his pard with sore perplexity as that slender, almost womanish figure shivered with strong emotions, such as he could only dimly guess at, though feeling them in almost as great a degree through brotherly sympathy.

Little by little, however, the power of true comradeship produced the desired effect, and once more nearly his old-time self, Mack Wilson sat with his back propped up against the low headboard of the bed, and Sam listened to his explanation of the road-agent affair.

"I'm not cool-headed enough to tell you right now just why and for what cause I hate this human devil," was the beginning of that explanation. "That can come later, after I know whether I'm talking of a dead dog or a living wolf. You'll not mind, pardner?"

"Don't say a word, Mack, unless you are perfectly willing. That you do hate the fellow is enough for me; I hate him too, after that!"

Their hands met in a warm clasp, then the wounded pard went on:

"All right, old man; I'll tell you enough to explain how I came to keep you waiting, as well as how I happened to come to you in such awkward trim. Later on—well, let that wait a bit longer!"

"I asked you to meet me here, for I felt that, in such a country I could hardly hope to do my work without at least one solid backer, and I knew that I could count on your aid, if you were still in the land of the living."

"Yes, or if over the range, just so your call reached me."

Sam spoke gently, but both tone and face said that he was in sober earnest, and that he felt even the grave could not hold him back from answering to the call of friendship.

Again their hands joined, and again Mack Wilson spoke:

"Well, I had what I felt was good reason for believing that my man was masquerading in these parts as a road-agent, under the title of Major Hold-up, and so I hurried on to make sure I had not been deceived, as I had been fooled so many times before."

"Why didn't you call on me before, pard?" asked Sam with gentle reproach.

"For one thing, I didn't know just where you had drifted, and for another, I hated this devil in human shape so intensely that I felt I must run him down on my own hook. There are some few things, old friend, which one can't easily offer to share even with as true a pard as you have proved to me."

Sweepstakes Sam nodded his understanding and Wilson resumed:

"I was hurrying here to Silverado, meaning to make it my base of operations, and hoping to discover something before you put in an appearance, you understand? Well, the first thing I knew, I was held up by a brace of masked rascals, who had the drop on me in the worst way!"

"Kicking was out of the question, and as I saw that neither of the fellows could possibly be my game—their size told me so much, even if their faces were out of sight—I came down with what grace I could summon, and after going through my pockets, the rascals had the impudence to truss me up like a calf bound to market, and marched me off through the hills."

"Where you found your man?"

There came no immediate reply, and as he covertly took note of the change which had come over the face of his pard, Sam promptly covered over that too pointed query, as he now regarded it.

"Let that point wait a bit, please, pardner. Why not smooth it all over as we go along?"

"What do you mean by that, Sam?"

"Well, you say you felt almost certain that your man was masquerading as Major Hold-up?"

Wilson gave a moody nod of assent.

"Then why didn't you make more sure of roping him in, by calling the legal authorities to your aid? Surely that would have been wiser than tackling an entire gang single-handed, or with only one pard to see you through the scrape?"

"Wiser, perhaps, but if a poisonous serpent had crept into the very heart of your happy home—if you saw its venom-laden fangs bared and ready to send death to the bosom of the one you loved best in all this world—would you run off to swear out a warrant for its arrest?"

With almost incoherent rapidity came these questions, and though they cast very little light on the mystery which had been perplexing him for the last few hours, Sam knew better than to ask for further information just then.

That would be freely given when Mack Wilson deemed the right time had come, and until then he was content to wait.

That trusting silence produced the desired effect, and Wilson rapidly recovered his former composure. Their eyes met for a few moments, then he spoke, slowly, calmly:

"It was a private grudge, you understand, Sam. One of those grudges which a white man feels that he must pay off, if it is paid at all. Of course I asked you to chip in, but—well, you and I are pretty much one and the same, eh?"

"Now you've said it, pard!"

"That's all right, then. I thought the fellow wouldn't drop to my racket until too late to save himself, but right there was where I got fooled, and fooled mighty bad, too!"

"Those two fellows never gave me the ghost of a chance to either break away or to try a grapple, until they had conducted me fairly and squarely into the road-agent camp. And then—he came to me!"

Once more there was a break, but as Sam maintained a prudent silence, this did not last long.

"Or I thought so, in those first few moments, and certainly every pains was taken to make me think that way, for he not only admitted that he was known in these parts as Major Hold-up, but his men spoke of, and to him, in my hearing by that title."

"Some day I'll tell you more of all I was forced to undergo during that first hour or two, pardner, but not just now. My head feels too hot. It's about all I can do to keep my feelings bottled up as it is. You understand how that might be, Sam?"

The Silver Sport nodded gravely. That loved face certainly was looking feverish, and he longed for that recital to come to an end, lest it prove the worse for his friend.

Still, he knew Wilson well enough to feel that the wisest way was to let him have his say out, once for all, for after that might come rest and recuperation.

"Well, Sam, for once, instinct and cunning acting got the best of me," came the next words. "The fellow who had declared himself Major Hold-up, removed his disguise, and the first glance showed me how completely I had been deceived."

"What! Not your game, then?"

"No. I was *his* game, rather, confound him for an adroit trickster! He gave me the laugh, and then bluntly told me that the high-muck-a-muck was absent just then, but that he had made all arrangements for my care, and that if I was anything like a wise man, I'd fall at once to saying my prayers and making my peace with Heaven, for that when the boss *did* put in an appearance, I'd be entirely too fully occupied for that."

"Then you never saw the real Major Hold-up at all?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

(FLEEING AND FIGHTING.)

THERE was a brief pause after this surprised query from the Silver Sport, but presently Mack Wilson spoke again:

"I couldn't exactly take oath to it, but I firmly believe that I not only *saw* Major Hold-up, but that I *killed* him as well!"

"Give it up!" resignedly sighed Sam, leaning back in his chair with a comical look of meek resignation which drew a brief laugh from the lips of his wounded pard: precisely what the cunning fellow was playing for, too.

Even so slight a relief from that intense strain would be of benefit to his pard, and hence was well worth playing for.

"Well, after that I had enough to suffer, and not merely through suspense caused by waiting and watching for my real enemy, though that in itself was enough to wear one out."

"The fellow who had so maliciously tricked me, seemed to consider it his bounden duty to torment me, body and mind, as much as a really fiendish ingenuity could contrive. As he once told me, the chief had bidden him take especial pains to see that time did not hang *too* heavily on my hands pending his return to camp, and right well he followed out that friendly hint."

"I'll bear his kindness in mind, pardner, if ever good luck makes him and I acquainted," grimly commented Sam.

"May that time come right speedily!" with fervid sincerity. "But let me get along, or the day will be spent before I finish my story."

"I was held in captivity after this fashion for three full days, so you can at least begin to figure up how big a debt you will have to wipe out when that introduction takes place, Sam! But on the fourth day I caught sound of an unusual row, and pretty soon made sure that the head imp was come at last!"

"Now, of course, I wasn't such a weak fool as to lie in bonds for so long a time without doing my level best to break away, but for a long time I was too carefully watched, to say nothing of my bonds, for even the ghost of a chance to come my way."

"This forenoon, though, my especial friend seemed to grow a bit more careless, and left unwatched for nearly two hours, I had partly freed myself from the ropes which held me helpless, when that unusual racket warned me to make all possible haste."

"I saw a fellow dismount from horseback at some little distance from where I was kept, and I believed I recognized my man at last!"

"And was it?"

"I can't swear to him, for just then I succeeded in slipping the last knot which held me foul, and as an armed fellow came up, no doubt with the intention of taking me to his boss, I let him have a clip alongside the head which turned him end for end, but didn't hinder him from letting out a howl which gave me precious little time for picking or choosing what was my best course."

"I did stop barely long enough to make a grab at his belt, and got one gun as I passed him by, then made hot-foot for the horse which the boss had ridden to camp."

"Of course there was a pretty hullabaloo, but I was almost to the horse before any of the other fellows could make out what had gone wrong, and as the guns began to speak, I was jumping into the saddle."

"I caught one of my rakes right there, but it was crazy shooting at best, and as I sent the frightened animal through rather than over a thick patch of brush, I heard a loud voice bidding them take, and not kill!"

"Of course I knew there was mighty little friendship or good will about that, but the command sounded none the less agreeably to my ears, as I reckon you can understand, Sam?"

"Well, I should say so!"

"After all, though, it was little more than saving cartridges, for a jump or two carried me beyond cover thick enough to turn a storm of lead, and by the time the rascals could catch up their nags, I was well out of their camp."

"As the two footpads hadn't taken the trouble to blindfold me when they run me in, of course I had a general idea of which way I must take to hit off the road to Silverado; and as soon as I could risk this without a certainty of running into those imps, I headed for the road, and after some straying, I struck it, safe and sound as yet."

"Only to be cut off, later on, of course?" muttered Sam, as he recalled that arrival in town.

Mack Wilson nodded assent, his own face regaining that hard, vicious expression which it had lost for the last few minutes.

"You've hit it, pard! Those devils knew that I'd be mighty apt to strike out for the nearest town, in case I succeeded in hitting off the main trail, and while doubtless some followed me as true as they knew how, others took the shortest cut through and over the hills to lay a trap into which I might be fool enough to run my head."

"Didn't that thought strike you, Mack?"

"Yes, but what else was I to do? I'd given you an appointment here, and I knew that you'd keep it, if living, and so—was I, to do less?"

"Better keep me waiting an age than—but it's too late to scold even a hot-head, and—it was just like you, pardner!"

Sam Singleton's eyes were brighter than ever as he leaned forward to grasp the hand of his friend, but there was a mist between them and that face; not tears, but something not so very far from it.

There was a brief silence, broken by Mark Wilson, who seemed in a hurry to finish his narrative, now he had gone so far.

"Well, they did just that, and the first I knew—though, mind you, pard, I was on the keen lookout for something of the sort, all the time—the bushes near the leaning trees seemed to turn to men, then came one of the hottest minutes of all my life!"

"And you've seen some pretty hot ones, pard!"

"I know, but this was scalding! I heard one fellow yelp something about taking me alive, and as the gang came in a heap, I shot once at the fellow I believed gave that order."

"One thief was grabbing my horse by the head, and I knocked his face into a cocked hat with a drive of my boot, sending him end over end. Others were trying to drag me out of the saddle, and then I fired at, all the time trying to send my nag through the jam."

"That came, at last, and then the devils began to use powder and lead, some one yelling out to kill the horse and cripple me. Just as he said that, I sighted him, and on my honor as a

white man I believe it was Major Hold-up, and my man, both in one!"

"And you downed him?" eagerly asked Sweepstakes Sam.

"I did just that, then!" with almost terrible earnestness. "I saw him reel and fall to my shot, and I would have given him all that was left in the gun, caring nothing for the rest just so I could make sure of his death, but just then a shot struck my pistol, and numbing my fingers knocked the weapon out of my grasp."

"Then the lead began to sting both me and the nag, and he broke away on a mad run for dear life!"

Mack Wilson paused at this, a trembling hand brushing the drops of sweat from his temples, his entire countenance betraying how intense was his excitement as he recalled those moments of fighting. But before Sam could find the right words in which to end that scene, the injured pard once more took up the broken thread.

"Well, we got away, as you know, but I was stung sharply enough to fancy it a great deal worse than it really was, and somehow I felt an almost crazy horror of falling into their hands again. Then, too, there came a thought of you, waiting for me here, and so—well, I just hung on as best I could, and urged the brute on without mercy."

"Until we came to a long, steep chute, that is: then my head took on a drunken whirl, and I didn't know anything more until I felt your arms around me, and—pard—"

Out came his hands, and there was a grip which would have done a misanthrope good just to see!

For some minutes after that, silence reigned, but as Mack once more showed signs of uneasiness, the Silver Sport spoke first:

"Well, we can't do much of anything but talk it over, until the lads get back from their hunt, so— You say those fellows took you to camp without blindfolding you?"

"Yes. No doubt they counted me as good as dead, even then!"

"Which is right where they got fooled, thank fate! Well, then, you surely ought to be able to find that same camp again, pardner, as soon as you are able to navigate?"

"I could find the place, of course, but what use? They'd have left it, long before. No doubt they've left for safer quarters ere this," was the moody reply.

"That of course, but did they take every clue away with them, though, my boy?" shrewdly asked the Sport.

"You mean that we might be able to trail 'em down from there?"

"Something like that, yes. Don't you reckon the chance is at least worth considering?"

This question came with a smile, for Sam saw that frown begin to pass away, and a more resolute expression to take its place.

"Wait a moment, Sam. You heard me say that I shot my man? Well, my first, last and only thought is to find that body!"

This was a sudden return to the manner which had given the Sport no little anxiety before, but he was shrewd enough to see that he must humor his pard until time and rest had cooled his blood and restored something of his customary nerve.

"Well, there are good men on the trail, and if anything of the sort is to be found, the offer I made will surely fetch it here. Until then we can do nothing more than wait and hope for good luck. That is clear enough, isn't it, old fellow?"

"I suppose so," with a long breath. "But if they fail, I'll start out in the morning, and—"

"Not unless you simmer down and get both sleep and rest, you won't, my hearty, and that's flatter than a flounder under a wagon-wheel! Now promise me, on honor, that you will try to sleep a bit?"

Where one less heartily loved almost surely would have failed, success came to Sam, and by resolutely refusing to talk himself, or to permit his pard to talk, the Sport eventually carried his point, and had the grim pleasure of seeing the injured man sink into a deep and peaceful slumber.

Very earnestly did the Sport scan and study that worn and haggard face during the next hour, fierce hatred for that unknown enemy entering his own heart as he noted the changes wrought therein since last he met his heart-brother.

"I'll find that human devil, be he dead or be he alive, if only to help pard pay off his score!" he vowed, and then, knowing that Wilson would hardly rouse up for several hours, at least, he silently arose from his seat and left the chamber, passing down-stairs and out of the hotel to the street, feeling that he could better compose his troubled thoughts in a fresher atmosphere, and away from that deep-lined face.

Then, too, he was eager to gain the earliest possible tidings of the man-hunt, and that wish almost unwittingly led his footsteps out of the town, toward the bridge which spanned the little river.

Unconsciously he was on the verge of making another discovery, and one which was fated to bring about strange results.

CHAPTER XIX.

MONTAGUE AND CAPULET.

THROUGH all the excitement which had come to Silverado that day, two of those who might naturally be expected to feel the strongest interest in matters so nearly concerning the Twin Lodes, had been conspicuous through their absence.

So far as Herman Gillespie was concerned, there was nothing so very remarkable in his absence, for he had never been noted for his sociability, so far as related to the citizens at large. He seemed entirely free from all minor weaknesses, and never wasted valuable time at saloons or other places of mining-camp resort.

In all this Milton Muldraw acted at his right hand, even as the stunted giant served as head man and manager of the Sure Thing.

But there was more room for wondering why Jasper Howland was not on hand to play his part, if only to back up his father. It was very seldom that fault could be found with the young fellow on any such score as this, and more than one stray look had been cast around in expectation of seeing Jasper coming to the front, more than ready to call the Sure Thing manager to an account for his slurs and covert thrusts.

Instead of mixing in a disagreeable squabble over the acquisition of an unwilling recruit, however, Jasper Howland was far more agreeably occupied, although his sweets were not wholly unmingled with aloes.

Could Abner Howland have seen how eagerly his son watched for the coming of that fair young maiden, and how joyously Jasper greeted Louise Gillespie when his waiting was finally rewarded, he would have known how well-founded the rumor was which he had so sternly scouted before.

Blushing, modest, shy, yet there was something in her manner of receiving that warm reception which would have told only too plainly that this was not the first clandestine meeting of the lovers.

For the first few minutes nothing was said or done which requires record in this connection. It was a meeting of lovers, where lips can be extremely eloquent without saying much, and where eyes do rather more than half the talking.

But, then, Jasper Howland was brought down from his seventh heaven of blissful delight, for Louise, too, had not entirely escaped the malicious tongue of rumor.

She spoke of the fears which had delayed her coming, and the dread of worse which must cut her stay short.

Of course Jasper would not hear to this last, yet even while declaring there was no danger, he admitted there was, by almost bitterly deploring the crazy feud which promised to ruin their lives even as it had worked great injury to their elders.

"I could almost curse the day when our claim was filed on the Daisy Belle," he said, moodily. "Nearly every dollar we own in the world is bound up in that mine, but I'd gladly see the whole thing sacrificed if by so doing I could wipe out this—this senseless feud!"

That was hardly the termination his mind had suggested, but Jasper Howland was deeply in love, and, after all, Herman Gillespie was her father! In love, relationship counts for so much—before marriage!

Louise was hardly less troubled than her lover, nor was this the first time such a wish had found an echo in her heart. She would have been first to give such a happy dawn glad welcome, but would that time ever come?

"Is there no way of bringing about a friendly understanding, then?" she asked, moving a tiny bit nearer her lover as he stood moodily downcast, digging a sullen heel into the sand between the rocks which afforded them almost perfect security against discovery by unfriendly eyes. "Can you do nothing with your father, Jasper?"

Almost unconsciously Louise showed herself a true daughter by that question, for it innocently implied that Abner Howland was the chief one in fault, not her own father.

"What can I do?" muttered the lover, his voice and face both showing how helpless he felt himself from that one point of view. "I would give worlds if I had them, just to put an end to this mad feud! I would gladly sacrifice all things—all things save one—to bring this about, but how can I?"

"I'm more helpless than even you are, Louise, for you have only to will, and it shall be! While I—I am helpless, I repeat!"

"I have no direct interest in the Daisy Belle, for that was discovered and recorded in my father's name. It stands now, just as it did at the start, and I really have no more say-so in the management than any one of the day laborers at work in the drift!"

"But—your father?"

"Is my father, Louise. I love him, and he loves me as few fathers ever love a grown-up son. I feel this—I know this! And yet, were I to openly urge him to yield even an inch to what he firmly believes are the unjust demands of your father, I know he would curse me as

traitor to my blood, and tear me out of his heart as though—"

"So cruel! Is he utterly heartless, dear Jasper?"

Despite his all-powerful love, young Howland flushed swiftly at this girlish speech, but the ready retort never reached his lips. He felt that such terms might with far more accuracy be applied to Herman Gillespie, but he had a point to carry, and recrimination surely would not help him to success.

"He believes he is in the right, just as your father doubtless holds the self-same opinion, dearest," as his arms closed more firmly about that willing yet coyly-reluctant form. "I might argue with him until hatred chased away the love that now fills his heart for his only surviving relative."

"Then—what hope remains?" sighed Louise, her head drooping until her face touched his breast.

A sudden flash came into his eyes, for now the longed-for opening seemed to present itself. Yet Jasper Howland hesitated before availing himself of that chance.

What if it were to make a bad matter worse? What if he were to frighten this pure, loving, yet loyal child into denying him even the imperfect consolation to be found in those stolen meetings?

Even as this dread presented itself, there came another: the memory of those words so coldly, sternly uttered by his father just before the sharp cry came from the lips of Sweepstakes Sam which led to the death of Rustling Tom, the would-be stage-wrecker.

Since Abner Howland had learned of his meetings with Louise, there could not endure much longer without open discovery, and before such a crisis should come, he must be fully armed, or all would be lost!

All this flashed through the young man's mind before he spoke, yet the pause was not long enough to either alarm or cause wonder in the mind of Louise Gillespie.

"If I can show you one sure hope, darling, will you help me grasp it in time?" he asked, his voice betraying his intense emotions; hope and fear almost equally blended.

That voice sounded so strange that Louise quickly lifted her head, drawing back far enough to look into his face, and something she saw there sent a shiver through her lithe frame.

"I don't—what is it you mean, Jasper?" she asked, faintly.

"That I can see only *one way through*, my precious," his arms once more taking full possession, his cheek touching her hair as he whispered: "Marry me, darling, and then the Twin Lodes may become one, for the interests of the two families will be the same!"

Louise caught her breath sharply. Her form seemed to yield more lovingly to his ardent clasp. But only for a few delicious moments. And when his lips sought to place love's seal upon hers, she drew back with a low, gasping cry, then said:

"No, Jasper; that must never be!"

"Not when I swear that it is our only hope, Louise? I've tried my level best, but this is the only way out I can think of."

The maiden blushed warmly, but bravely met his gaze while saying:

"I know, Jasper. I, too, have been trying, as I promised you. And—don't look at me so, please! I thought of—of *that way*, but it can never be, dear!"

"It must, it shall be, Louise!"

"It can never be, Jasper," came the repetition, and while full of sadness, her tones grew calmer, stronger. "I know my father as only a daughter can know a parent. I know that his prejudice—hatred, even, if the whole truth must be told—is far too strong ever to be overcome by such a rash action as you propose. Instead of growing reconciled, he would hate me, and—*kill you!*"

Full of emotion though her tones were, Howland could see that she was firm in her refusal, and moodily bowed his head, his eyes fleeing from him as though it had never found birth.

"What other way is there, then?"

"There may come a change, Jasper. We can at least hope, while waiting," gently answered the maiden, changing places and offering encouragement instead of receiving it. "There is nothing else that can be done, so far as I can see."

"If you would only consent, Louise! Why will you not, darling? Why not at least make sure of our future by—"

"Don't, Jasper, please. If you only knew how difficult you are making it for me, dear!"

He was deeply touched by her words, her tone, but he was a man, and, like all such when a dearest hope is at stake, unconsciously cruel in his efforts to win the prize.

"If you loved me one-half as madly as I worship you, Louise, you'd never let such trifles stop you!"

"Is a father's curse a trifle, Jasper?"

"No, of course not; but that would never come when he saw that it was past mending by anger, darling. He'd make the best of it, then, and when, as man and wife, you and I went to him—and to my father, too—humbly asking for—"

givenness, and showing how easily this quarrel might be ended! Can't you see, darling?"

Louise came forward swiftly, her lips touching his, but before even his arms could clasp her form, she sprung back with uplifted hand.

"Stop, Jasper! Let that be as a sacred seal to my pledge, dear! I swear that I will never wed another, and never *you* without the consent of the only parent God has left me!"

Jasper shrunk back with a gasping breath which was little better than a groan. Her face, even more than the words spoken, told him that further pleading would be breath wasted in vain. Once given like this, her decision was irrevocable.

"All looks very dark just now, dear," she added, her voice low and far from steady, but her determination unshaken. "But we can hope, we *must* hope for better things by and by! It will not always remain so dark and cheerless. Even the coldest storm must blow over in time. And so it will be with this—I firmly believe that, dearest!"

"If I could only think the same way!"

"You must try—keep on hoping, Jasper, and if we are true to ourselves, true to our filial duty, Heaven will surely take pity on us in its own good time."

As she uttered these encouraging words, Louise Gillespie moved slowly away from that rendezvous, and Jasper Howland bore her company.

They were still in sight of the rocky nook where that meeting had taken place when a human figure rose up from back of a little patch of bushes hard by, glaring after them with a low, odd chuckle.

"Hope on, hope ever, eh? Well, why not? Care killed a cat, they say!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECRET OF THE GRAVE.

MACK WILSON was still sleeping when Sam Singleton returned to the Blossom House, and that restorative unconsciousness lasted until well along in the evening.

Long before the wounded man awoke, the man-hunters had returned to town, with no trophies to show, no claims to put in for the reward offered by the Silver Sport.

They had done their level best to follow the trail of the retreating road-agents, but had lost it beyond hope before the setting of the sun. Nor had they found anything of the dead or wounded in whom this second stranger had betrayed such a fierce interest.

All of this Sam gathered up and had ready for his pard when that refreshing sleep came to a natural ending.

No one save themselves ever knew just how Mack Wilson received that unwelcome information, and neither of the two pards mentioned it.

Enough for our purpose that the tale was told, and the best made of it. That Wilson awoke in a more natural state of mind, hungry as a wolf, and already showing signs of a rapid recovery from his trials, his hurts, his great loss of blood.

The two pards talked long together that night before sleep came to either of them, and broke off only when Mack Wilson carried his main point: a resolve to himself take the trail of Major Hold-up with the new day.

Sam yielded at length, but with a mental reservation. If this truly wonderful recuperation should not last as it had begun, he would hold his impetuous pard in check, even though he had to employ actual force to gain that end.

Fortunately for both, perhaps, that rallying seemed even more pronounced as Mack Wilson rose and dressed for breakfast. Barring a bit more pallor than usual, and a slight degree of stiffness from his flesh wounds, he seemed nearly as well as ever, and Dr. Hedden, when he called, pronounced his patient almost as good as he ever was.

With his last prop so decidedly knocked from under him, the Silver Sport could no longer combat the resolve which his pard had expressed so decidedly, and as soon as their morning meal was disposed of, he had the landlord put them up a substantial lunch, and hiring a second horse to keep pace with the one which had carried Mack Wilson into Silverado the day before, the two pards mounted and rode out of town.

Quietly as they moved, they did not escape without attracting rather more attention than was agreeable to the Sport from Sweepstakes, but he promptly bluffed off their few questioners, distinctly making it known that they neither wished for nor would accept any companions on this, their private venture.

"If we make anything better than a water-haul, be sure all Silverado shall know of it," was his concluding sentence.

No attempt was made to hinder their departure, nor was an effort given toward following them, so far as they could discover; and both the Silver Sport and Mack Wilson kept close watch for some such movement as the last.

Nothing happened worthy of note until the Flame was climbed, and the Bridal Pair was reached.

At this point Wilson insisted on dismounting for a personal search, but nothing new rewarded

his pains, and after taking note of the still visible blood-marks, and satisfying himself that nobody had been concealed by the road-agents in that immediate vicinity, he remounted his horse and the two pards struck off at a brisker pace.

Their destination now was the camp of the road-agents to which Mack Wilson had been conducted by his captors, and though his flight had been of such a hasty nature, he experienced far less difficulty in locating that retired spot than his less sanguine friend had dared hope for.

Although it was almost certain that the outlaws would not linger long in a spot where they ran the risk of being looked for by an armed force from town, set in motion by the one who had so boldly escaped from their grip, neither of the adventurers were men to take unnecessary chances, and no sooner did Mack Wilson declare that they were well within reach of the rendezvous, than they alighted, tethering their horses in a snug covert where chance discovery by an enemy was hardly worth taking into consideration.

Wilson led the way, closely followed by his pard, with his revolver drawn and ready; but all this precaution proved pains thrown away.

The camp was entirely deserted, and no trace of warmth lingered in any of the ash-piles, as tested by the hand of the Silver Sport.

"They pulled-foot right away, for a fact!" came his admission, as he left the last gray heap, to cast curious glances around the place.

There was not much to see, and it hardly required a second glance to convince him that this camp had been but a temporary shift, and certainly not the regular refuge of that lawless band.

"Hunt for a trail worth following, pardner," urged Wilson, who was himself quartering the ground like a hound seeking for scent. "If I can't find what I'm looking for right here, we'll have to go where better luck awaits us!"

Sam did not ask what it was his pard was looking after, for he already knew: it was for signs of the dead, rather than of the living!

After all, it was the Sport who made the discovery, though his interest could hardly be said to lie as deep-seated as that of Mack Wilson. And for some little time he held his peace, inwardly debating whether or no he would not be showing greater wisdom in keeping that find a secret from his pard.

But, when Wilson gave over his examination of the camp-ground in grim despair, friendship yielded, and in silence Singleton led his pard to a retired spot beyond the edge of the camp, pointing in silence to where the ground gave signs of having been disturbed at no distant time.

Wilson stared at the place for a moment, then turned to grip that pointing hand with an ardor which spoke far more eloquently than words could have done.

Still in silence, he dropped to his knees and began opening what both pards firmly believed would prove to be a human grave!

The Silver Sport likewise fell to work, and though they had no tools save such as their ingenuity could improvise, the soil proved soft and comparatively free from stones. Then, too, it was not at all likely the road-agents would consume very much valuable time in digging a grave of the regulation depth for one who surely had passed beyond the danger line which might even then be closing rapidly in upon themselves.

This was the Silver Sport's suggestion. As for Mack Wilson, he required no such encouragement. Had that grave reached to the depth of a prospect shaft, still he would have persevered until the secret it might hold lay bared to his eyes.

Uneasily noting the fierce, if repressed, excitement under which his wounded pard was laboring, Sam thought it nothing more than wisdom to remind him, after all, that his hopes might come to naught.

"Don't waste breath telling me *that*, man!" impatiently retorted his friend, still making the loose dirt fly. "Would they dig this hole just for killing time?"

"Of course not, but mayn't it be to hide what you are *not* hoping to find? Even if a grave, is that surety it holds *your* game?"

"Would they take so much trouble simply for an ordinary thief?"

"Why not, if that thief, being recognized, would endanger living men? Why not, if they would be suspected through known friendship to him?"

This was a shrewd point, and Wilson did not attempt to combat it. He recognized its probability, and yet he labored on with renewed vigor, as though rest was an impossibility until that grave had finally yielded up all it might be trying to hold a secret.

Sam felt hardly satisfied with the point he had made, but recognizing the hopelessness of winning more, he, too, toiled on, and long before the first discovery came, his interest in the outcome had grown almost painful.

That discovery came at length, and when there could be no further doubt as to a human form having been hastily interred there, Wilson worked with fierce energy—until the face of the dead road-agent was brought to view!

One keen, breathless look, then Wilson drew back with a low, hoarse cry of intense disappointment, for this was not the face he was wanting!

"Not Major Hold-up! Curses cover—"

For a few seconds he was not accountable for what passed his lips, and Sam Singleton wisely permitted that insane fit to pretty well exhaust itself before he interfered. When he did speak, it was to ask:

"Then you never saw the fellow in life, pardner?"

Wilson gave a start, staring at the speaker, then dashing a hand across his eyes before taking another look at the corpse, only the head and shoulders of which had been freed from the dirt.

"Saw him? Yes, but what matter, since he's not *that*—not *my* man?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe much, old fellow. Then he was one of the road-agents, you think?"

"The one who played that trick on me when I was brought here, first off," came the unhesitating reply. "What of it, though?"

"As I said before, maybe nothing, maybe a good sized heap. Since we failed to find your game, we've got to hunt elsewhere, haven't we?"

"I'll never give over until I've seen him—like *this*!" with a savage gesture toward the corpse.

"All right, then why not use our minutes in seeing if we can't find some hint to guide our further search? Maybe that very clew is to be found upon this carcass! Who knows?"

With that Sweepstakes Sam resumed his work, throwing out the loosened dirt and plainly resolved to complete that resurrection even if he had to do it all by himself.

Mack Wilson quickly rallied and joined in, and ere long the body was freed from dirt sufficiently for them to drag it forth from the rude grave; and then—the secret was theirs!

The day had fairly waned, and twilight was beginning to render the little fire necessary for even the keen-eyed pards as their heads almost touched as they bent over that note-book taken from the corpse.

The face of Mack Wilson looked almost ghastly in its pallor as the ruddy flames lighted it up, and Sweepstakes Sam seemed far more than usually grave as, at length, their heads lifted and their eyes met squarely.

Not a word escaped from either, but their right hands moved out and their fingers closed in a firm grip.

Was it an oath they were thus recording? If so, be sure 'twould never be violated by either of those true friends!

Singleton gave the note-book to his pard; then both men arose, passing over a few rods to where that grave had been opened to rob it of its important secret.

The opening was closed, now, and carefully smoothed over, the hands of an enemy taking far more care than had the hands of friends, for now no man would suspect that a corpse lay hidden there!

Then the pards returned to the fire, carefully stamped it out, after which they regained their horses and rode toward Silverado.

CHAPTER XXI.

MAJOR HOLD-UP GIVES NOTICE.

THE two friends were not permitted to lie abed quite so late on the morning after their visit to the deserted camp of the road-agents, for a lusty thumping echoing through this chamber caused the Silver Sport to rise up in bed with an answering shout, at the same time reaching for his belt of arms which, like a genuine frontiersman, was conveniently nigh his hand, even during the hours given over to slumber.

"What in blazes—Who's there, anyway?" he cried out in anything but an amiable tone of voice, as that loud summons resolved itself into a simple knocking at his door.

"Me—Blossom—the landlord!" came a hurried, even agitated response from beyond that locked barrier. "Devil's to pay if—"

"What! Nothing gone wrong with pard?" cried the Sport, leaping out of bed and to the door in "one time and one motion."

He flung the door open, but at the same time another head showed itself from the other side of the hall, and the two pards instantly recognized each other.

"What sort of a circus is it you're trying to run into the ground, I'd like to know?" demanded Wilson, in anything but an angelic temper, if judgment was taken through his voice.

"Darned if I know, pardner! Had I better kill him *first*, or wait until after asking a question or two?"

"Kill him, of course!" and Wilson withdrew his head, his voice sounding a bit smothered yet coming distinctly enough for the addition to be made out: "Only do it with as little row as you know how, pardner!"

Landlord Blossom hardly knew whether to take this query and answer for genuine or not, but he shrunk away a bit, lifting an appealing hand as he hastily spluttered:

"Don't—I didn't mean to—"

"Walking in your sleep, eh? Well, you'll never do the like again, for this is the final straw! Say your everlasting lay-me-down, and then—what?"

"Major Hold-up—he says—come down and see, cuss it all!"

Sweepstakes Sam was handling his weapons after a decidedly business-like fashion, and the landlord, having on more than one occasion been given proofs that boarders are not always to be depended upon, turned and beat a hasty retreat, flinging those final words over his shoulder as he fled for dear life.

Sweepstakes Sam broke into a hearty laugh at that ridiculous spectacle, the last vestige of irritation vanishing from his handsome face as he did so. But at the same instant the door of the second chamber flew open, and Mack Wilson sharply asked:

"What's that about Major Hold-up, Sam?"

"Glory to old smoke! He hain't come clean to this yer, I'm hopin'?" spluttered Jolly Dick Blue, likewise emerging from his room, holding his nether garments in place with one hand, while with the other he gripped an ancient-looking revolver. "Whar's Major Hold-up?"

Sam Singleton glanced from one to the other, then made a little gesture which was plainly intended for the eyes of Mack Wilson alone.

"You can't prove it by me, friends. If the boss of the Blossom has not turned clean crazy, then all I've got to say is that his looks go back on their owner most scandalously!"

There was a brief pause, during which the trio interchanged glances of perplexity, but then Landlord Blossom called up from the foot of the stairs:

"Come down as soon as ye get rigged, please, gents! There's a message here from Major Hold-up, and—Oh, do come down and look with your own eyes, then!"

There could be no doubt as to the powerful excitement under which the landlord was laboring, and Mack Wilson only paused to utter:

"Dress, pard, and let's see what's gone crooked now!"

He set the example by springing back into his little chamber, finishing his dressing with wonderful celerity, and being the first of the trio to put in a reappearance.

The Silver Sport and the stage-driver were not far behind him, however, and then the three men clattered down-stairs to where Landlord Blossom was nervously waiting, and who, without giving either a chance to put a question, sprung to the front door of his establishment, giving a dramatic gesture as he cried:

"Look! See for your own selves, gentlemen! Right there it was when I saw it first, and right here it is now!"

Sweepstakes Sam caught a glimpse of a paper tacked to the outer door, but could distinguish nothing of its contents from where he stood.

"Looks like a sheriff's sale, or a school-board meeting," he began, only to break off abruptly as Mack Wilson gave a low, interested cry at sight of a boldly-written name near the bottom of that sheet of paper.

"Look at this, pard! It's for us, sure as fate!"

Mack Wilson spoke with poorly veiled excitement, and then the two pards were standing shoulder to shoulder, reading the boldly written "Notice" which some daring hand had fastened to the front door of the Blossom House, giving the proprietor a shock from which he evidently had not yet begun to recover.

"FAIR WARNING!"

"I forbid any and all persons from giving food, drink, lodging, aid, or comfort in any manner shape or form to a person who calls himself Mack Wilson, and who is now stopping at the Blossom House, Silverado."

"Turn him out, or pay the full penalty!"

"Th' hand that dares to feed him, shall perish!"

"The roof that gives him shelter shall go up in smoke!"

"The town that harbors him longer shall be wiped off the face of the earth!"

"First, last, only warning! Take heed, and all right. Refuse to be warned, and your doom is sealed beyond all hope!"

"MAJOR HOLD-UP."

Thus the warning read.

Simultaneously the eyes of the two pards reached that bold signature, and then they turned to look at each other. Their hands came together in a firm grip, and though not a word was spoken, those who saw that action could hardly doubt as to the silent vow which it implied.

Landlord Blossom was strongly agitated, evidently taking that hint as to the torch closely to himself, but Jolly Dick Blue was hotly indignant when he had spelled along far enough to take in the full meaning of those posted lines.

"Why, cuss an' ee-ternally blister the dirty, impident whelp houn' dog to never come back ag'in!" he exploded, his honest if sorely battered countenance fairly aglow with indignation as he turned toward the two pards. "Who's he to come sech turrible frills as *them*? Who's he, to say which is what, an' whyfore this is thus? Durn his impident pictur! Ef he wants to run

Silverado, why don't he come out an' 'lectioneer fer office like any other dug-gun fool' politician? Tell me *that*, will ye?"

For once the worthy driver was wasting his eloquence, for not even the man in whose behalf he was thus exploding, paid him attention. Mack Wilson looked at the landlord, then asked:

"You say this notice was here when you first looked? Then you did not hear any sound during the night which aroused your suspicions?"

"Nothing like posting this precious warning, he means," explained Sam.

"Never a sound, gents, and that—if he could do such a trick without being caught, couldn't he just as easy set fire to the place?"

There showed the real fear, and Wilson's lip curled with contempt as he recognized it; but before he could shape the words which were forming in his mind, the landlord mumbled further:

"I hate to say it, gents, but—I'm a poor devil, ye see, and if it *was* to happen—"

"Is this meant for a notice that you refuse us lodging, Mr. Blossom?" gravely interrupted the Silver Sport.

"No, but—I'm a poor man, sir, and if any such thing *should* happen as that says, I'd be ruined—clean ruined, sir!"

"Don't waste breath over him, pardner," began Mack Wilson, but stopping short as Sam turned at the sound of a footfall coming their way.

It was Milton Muldraw, his strong features showing an unwonted degree of excitement, and in his hand a crumpled paper with torn corners.

"Take a squint at *that*, will ye, sir?" was his blunt salutation, holding out the paper toward Sam, who saw at a glance it was a warning similar to the one still sticking to the hotel door.

"What do you think of that for a pure—Hello!" He gave a start of surprise as he caught sight of that other notice, running his eyes swiftly over the written lines.

"A twice-told tale, you perceive, sir," said Mack Wilson, taking that torn paper from his hand. "May I ask where *this* was found, sir?"

"Tacked to the front door of my hotel—just like *this*!" with a gesture to point his meaning plainer. "Of course it's aimed mainly at *you*, as his pard?"

"My name is Mack Wilson, yes," answered the one addressed.

Muldraw abruptly faced Sam, speaking rapidly and earnestly.

"I'd be lying if I said this notice didn't read as though Major Hold-up meant pure business, Singleton, but if you'll agree to join in with our side, I'll insure you against any harm he or his gang can measure out. Say you're with us, and we'll hunt the audacious rascal down and pay off his insolent threats with a rope!"

The Man from Sweepstakes, listened quietly, but made no immediate reply, for his keen eyes, looking past the Sure Thing manager, caught sight of another figure hastening in that direction, and a faint smile came into his face as he recognized Jasper Howland.

Muldraw noticed that smile, and instinct seemed to warn him that his rivals were not permitting the grass to grow under their feet, either. A scowl followed that hasty glance to the rear, and he once more spoke:

"Say you'll join us, gentlemen, and we'll wipe out this insult in the heart's blood of the whole infernal crew!"

Jasper Howland only quickened his pace as he recognized those composing that little group in front of the Blossom House, and with a passing glance at that notice on the door, he produced a third copy, giving Sam an opportunity to glance over it if he so desired, while he explained:

"I found this fastened to our house, Mr. Singleton, and at once hurried here to let you see my answer to such a cowardly warning. Look!"

He deliberately spat upon the paper, tore it in four pieces, dropped them to the ground, where they were stamped upon by his heel.

"*That* is my answer to the cowardly bound who dared insult us by pinning such a warning to our door! I'll serve the author after the same fashion if I can find him out—as find him I will, if close and earnest hunting can bring him to light!"

"On conditions, of course!" sneeringly hinted Muldraw, his face flushed with rage, his little eyes glowing with anything save blessings upon this, one of his most dangerous rivals.

"I ask no pledge from *your* lips, Mr. Singleton," added young Howland, without noticing that taunt by so much as a look in passing Muldraw by. "But, this much I will say: stay here, and we will defend you from harm."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PARDS GIVE THEIR DECISION.

"*THAT* sounds hearty, and we thank you accordingly, Mr. Howland," declared Sweepstakes Sam, grasping the hand which willingly met his.

"No thanks are needed, sir," quickly added the young man, his face betraying something of his powerful emotions. "You have earned far

more than we can ever repay. You saved the stage from being wrecked, and—"

"By a Daisy Belle man, remember!" viciously cut in Muldraw.

Even that taunt was passed over without notice for the present, although a hot flush told how keenly it was felt by the young man.

"By so acting, sir, you gave us a chance to show that we held no sympathy with the dirty scoundrels who could stoop so low as to use such abominable means to gain their ends. If Tom Russell once proclaimed himself our man—"

"As he surely *did*, times beyond counting!"

"He either lied, or was later on bought over by the money of some villain even more evil than himself!"

"Do you mean *me* by that, Jasper Howland?"

"If the cap fits you, wear it, Muldraw!"

"Stop, both of you hot-heads!" cried Sam Singleton, as he stepped in between the rivals, pushing each one back, then his hands dropping to the weapons in his belt. "No man or men shall quarrel over any action of mine, unless I'm holding up the opposite end. Once for all, you want to understand just so much, gentlemen."

His manner, even more than his words, checked what bade fair to culminate in a bloody encounter, and as Muldraw sullenly drew back a bit, Jasper Howland added:

"Pay no attention to this insolent warning, sir. Stay on here until your business calls you further, and I pledge you every man who stands for the Daisy Belle, as guard, or aid in paying off this dirty hound!"

"I've made the same offer ahead of you, Howland."

"I speak for my father, as well as myself, Mr. Singleton. We ask no pledge, no bond, no servitude on your part. Stay here, and we'll defend both you and your pard against all the umps Major Hold-up can summon to his assistance, even though he depopulate all Tophet in his efforts!"

Sweepstakes Sam listened to this rather overstrained but thoroughly sincere speech with a faint smile, then made reply:

"You're overdrawing it a bit, I fancy, my friend, since in saving the stage and passengers I was saving my own valuable neck. Still, I think I catch your meaning, and be sure I value it accordingly."

"My memory is not an extra short one, and I've not yet forgotten that your father's son saved my life by downing Rustling Tom, the other night."

"Then you'll not let this fellow drive you away?"

"Not by making such empty threats as these, you can rest assured. I value them as little as I fear Major Hold-up himself. Still, I'm entirely at the service of my pard, Mark Wilson, and his decision is *mine*, as a matter of course."

Jasper Howland turned toward the other, saying quickly:

"My offer takes you in, sir, with your friend. Will you accept it?"

All this had taken time, as a matter of course, and such news was bound to spread with rapidity, even had those who received the warning posted by the audacious road-agent, taken pains to conceal that fact.

This precaution had not been taken, and in ones, twos and little squads, the citizens were beginning to gather in front of the Blossom House, their strong interest showing in faces and through eager speech.

Thus it came that, when Sweepstakes Sam stepped back, to give place to his pard, quite a little congregation met those cool, keen eyes as Mack Wilson cast his glance around before speaking.

"This is hardly the sort of reception I expected to hold, my good friends," he began, his voice reaching even the most distant, though by no means high-pitched or strained. "But since you have come here, I'll try to make once telling answer for all hands."

"Possibly some of you saw how I came to town, and doubtless the rest of you have heard something concerning it. I came straight from the grip of this fellow who here signs himself Major Hold-up, and in getting out of that grip, I think I made my mark on one or more of his gang."

"I might leave you to infer that it is solely on account of this bit of a brush that Major Hold-up has sworn to kill or destroy all to whom or which I may owe shelter or food, but that would be acting a lie, and you have treated us far too white to be so repaid."

Wilson paused for a few moments, slowly brushing a hand across his brows, like one clearing a troubled mind, or else one finding it no easy task to decide just what to say and what to leave untold.

This indecision was of but brief duration, however, and he resumed:

"The hatred lying between me and this self-admitted outlaw, goes far back of the little brush I had with his men on the stage-road. There is a deep-seated feud between us, which will end only when one or the other of us is fitted for a high lot on the hillside!"

"Some day I may conclude to tell all the world just what bitter black cause I have for

hating this devil in human form. If I should so conclude, rest assured Silverado will not be the last one told."

A cheer from some of the crowd greeted this frank declaration, but the interruption was only momentary, and Mack Wilson spoke again:

"Let it suffice for now, that this world, huge though you may think it, is all too small for both Major Hold-up and Mack Wilson. One or the other of us must die, and it was in hopes of ending this feud once for all, that I made an appointment here with the truest pard mortal man ever had: Sweepstakes Sam, the Silver Sport!"

Another, louder and more prolonged cheer broke from the gathering, for by his wonderful display since striking Silverado, the adventurer had won notoriety if not many sincere friends.

Sweepstakes Sam's eyes laughed, but he made a gesture of bashful embarrassment, saying in an affected tone:

"Git out—yeoul!"

"That is heaven's own truth, gentlemen, even if his native modesty does seek to turn my tribute into ridicule," earnestly repeated Wilson, not to be driven from his point by such means. "And now you know why it was that Samuel Singleton took such long chances against great odds, rather than enter into any engagement which might hamper his actions when his pard came to claim his aid and assistance."

"He's clean white, if he *did* make a holy show of our two best men!" cried one enthusiast from that now goodly crowd.

"And I, as one of those same monkeys, bear willing testimony to that same effect," frankly declared Milton Muldraw, changing his former tactics with more than tolerable grace.

Mack Wilson smiled his gratification at this, for he was in thorough earnest, and never felt more deeply indebted to his true-hearted pard than he did right then.

But a lifted hand quickly produced silence, and he spoke on.

"You have seen, or at least have heard, of the savage threats which this Major Hold-up has posted in your town the night last past. He says that death and ruin shall overtake one and all who may show us kindness or lend us help, and from what I know of the fellow in the past, he will most certainly endeavor to put those menaces into execution, if Silverado continues to afford us shelter."

"Who's a-keerin' fer all that guff? Tell him to go to the devil an' shake himself!"

"That's what, pardner! Jest you critters stay on hyar, an' act as a sort o' bait to draw the dirty whelp into town. We'll answer fer the clean-up—eh, mates?"

A storm of assent greeted this speech, but as all eyes were turned toward him, Mack Wilson slowly shook his head.

"I thank you most heartily, gentlemen, for my pard as well as on my own account. I feel that you mean it all—"

"Try us, and see for yourselves!"

"So I would, if I did not know the caliber of this fiend far better than any of you gentlemen do."

"I know that he has shown no particular brutality, no excess of barbarity since beginning operations in this section, but I know of what this demon in human shape is capable when his worst passions are allowed full sway, as they surely would be were you to flatly fly in the face of this posted warning. And knowing all this, I would be worse than a cur to let you invite such punishment when I can gain my ends even more surely by taking a less risky course."

"Surely, sir, you're not going to let his threats drive you out of town?" remonstrated Jasper Howland, earnestly. "Don't make us blush for our lack of manhood in giving even such a knave a fair excuse for saying that we let his threats scare us into driving you two men forth as friendless exiles!"

Mack Wilson smiled his thanks for this impetuous speech, but at the same time shook his head in rejection.

"I've made up my mind, sir, and you, gentlemen. We are going to bid you a temporary farewell, and once we have bit off the trail of this Major Hold-up and his lawless gang, we'll camp on it till he is put forever beyond the power of uttering either threats or boasting of what he has no power to enforce against your honest good will."

"We will leave Silverado to-day, not through fright because of these threats, but simply through a purpose which my pard and I formed last night, after returning from our little scout among the hills."

With this sentence, Mack Wilson bowed to the company in general, then stepped back like one who had said all that he thinks necessary. Without paying any attention to the little storm of cheers which followed his speech, he entered the hotel and was lost to their view.

The Silver Sport promptly took his place, and smiling genially, he spoke the few words he seemed to think necessary on his part.

"I'm not worth a continental at a stump-speech, and so I'll simply ask you to look back at what my pard said, and add 'Them's my sentiments!'"

"Where he goes, I go. What befalls him, comes down on top of me as well. We are one

and indivisible, which must serve to explain why I did such healthy kicking when you fellows tried to mix me up in your Twin Lode squabble, don't you see?"

Turning to those closer about him, Sweepstakes Sam extended a hand to Milton Muldraw, which that worthy showed no hesitation in clasp, no doubt greatly pleased to find that this cool adventurer was about to leave town, since he could no longer hope to enlist him on the Sure Thing side.

"We've had our little fun, Mr. Muldraw, and of course there are no hard feelings left, else you would hardly accept my hand so frankly!"

"None on my side, and you have still less cause for feeling that way, sir," was the prompt response. "I'm only sorry I can't go along on this man-hunt with you, but—well, we may come to fighting right here in town, unless the clouds soon pass away!"

"As they surely will if my wishes can bring that end about," gravely said Singleton, turning from Muldraw to young Howland, gripping his hand cordially in turn, and adding: "I'll say goodbye to you for both father and son, my friend. You saved my life, and some day I may be able to return that favor—who, knows?"

Then watching his chance, he whispered swiftly into Jasper's ear:

"Let me see you in private before we leave, and I may give you a valuable hint, my good friend!"

Then he followed his pard into the hotel.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FATHER AND SON.

HAVING once fairly formed their decision, the two pards cut very little time to waste, Sweepstakes Sam seeming fully as eager to take up the trail of vengeance as was Mack Wilson himself.

Dr. Hedden gave a final dressing to those wounds, then declared that nothing beyond ordinary care was necessary to a complete and speedy cure, pocketed a liberal fee and went away about his other business, making no scruple about declaring both Wilson and Singleton as perfect gentlemen as had ever honored Silverado with their presence.

It was no very difficult matter for Sweepstakes Sam to negotiate for a fair saddle-horse, since his pockets appeared to be liberally supplied with money; and then, with Wilson once more astride the animal which had carried him to his pard after such a strange fashion, the adventurers rode out of Silverado on their campaign against the road-agents.

A goodly number of eyes took note of that departure, and more than one frank urging to stay or to at least accept help, had to be silenced by the pards before they could win fairly clear of town.

Curiosity or friendship led a few still further, and when Sweepstakes Sam trotted across the bridge which spanned the little river, he turned in his saddle to wave a final farewell to a particular one among the others: Jasper Howland, son of the Daisy Belle owner.

"Be good to yourself, pardner!" came that cheery shout. "Live and let live, so far as the Twin Lodes are concerned, and—I say!"

"All ears open, my friend!"

"If Major Hold-up *should* chance to drop in this way to inquire after our good health, just tell him we've started out on a call to him, if he'll only stay put long enough."

"All right. Anything else I can do for you, Singleton?"

"Love to everybody, and good luck be with you! You'll hear from us before long, even if you don't see us in person."

Then Sweepstakes Sam rode away in chase of his less talkative pard, who was now at the foot of the Flume, only waiting for his friend before he began that long ascent.

Jasper Howland watched them out of sight, then turned away and moved slowly in the direction of the Daisy Belle works, his gloomy visage speaking of anything rather than gay or happy thoughts.

For one thing, he knew that trouble over the Twin Lodes could not be delayed much longer. The two factions were living over a powder magazine, where the timbers were already charring. At any instant a spark might take effect upon all that explosive material, and then—

"It'll be all the worse for being held back so long!" the young man told himself, with a stifled groan of angry impotence. "There be killing on both sides, and even if we all escape, matters will stand worse than ever, for he'll set all the blame upon us, and ten to one Muldraw'll make him believe just that, too!"

Possibly young Howland gave the manager too much, and the owner of the Sure Thing too little credit on that score, but even had he known this, what matter? Either way, all of his hopes for winning Louise Gillespie would vanish forever in case that bloody collision should take place, no matter which faction rightly merited the blame for striking the first blow.

Up to that last interview with the girl he loved so passionately, Jasper Howland had always a glad hope to brace him up, even against

the darkest of rumors and most gloomy prospects. Even though they might be overwhelmed with defeat, losing their worldly all, if he could succeed in carrying Louise off as his wife, still he would be a winner!

But now—her grave, sad vow seemed to ring again in his ears, and knowing her as he did, it was a very sad-hearted, despondent lover who drew near the rude buildings which marked the site of the Daisy Belle Lode.

Here Abner Howland was impatiently awaiting the coming of his son, who was far behind the hour set for his relieving the elder representative at their post, which Abner had been holding through the night.

Strong though his nerves were, Abner Howland was beginning to show the effects of that long, unbroken strain, and his greeting was tinged with an acidity which he seldom displayed toward this, his only child.

Jasper hastened to explain what had delayed him so long, and Abner listened with a thoughtful frown which might mean much or little, could one have seen just what was going on in that busy brain of his.

He betrayed some little uneasiness as Jasper told of the road-agent's warning, and his eyes flashed around them, seemingly taking note of the rude mine building, of the recently-erected stockade from within which an armed force could stubbornly resist any attempt to secure possession of the mine proper, even though such an assault was made by a greatly superior force.

Yet one enemy was to be dreaded more than all else: fire could quickly open a breach which even brave bodies might not be able to close, and the hint at incendiaryism given in that warning by Major Hold-up, may have caused Abner Howland to exclaim:

"Well, I'm glad they're out of town, and I'll lose mighty few tears if they never show up in Silverado again! It's been a steady squabble ever since that young fellow struck the camp, and—not but that I'd like mighty well to have him on our side, son! I would just that, for the time's coming, and that mighty sudden, when even one more good man may make all the difference between victory and defeat!"

"It may not be quite so bad as that, father."

"Not so bad?" irritably echoed Abner Howland. "I'd admire to know what you'd call worse, young man? If we can put off the end longer than another week, call me a liar!"

"You don't mean it, sir?" cried the startled young man.

"But I do mean it, and if you'd kept your two eyes half-way open of late, instead of mooning about like a young cockerel with the pip, you'd know just that much, too! I say it again: even if the Daisy hands don't strike another lick, the Sure Thing gang will break it over the line before another week can pass away!"

"And then?"

Something in the tones of his son caused Abner Howland to experience a hot, fierce rage, and he echoed:

"And then? Just this, young man, since it seems you need the telling in plain words. The right shall come on top, while the wrong is trampled into the dust—*mud*, rather, if there be blood enough in Sure Thing veins to mix it up!"

Jasper Howland felt an involuntary shiver as he heard these coldly savage words, and for a few moments he was at a loss just what to say or do. But then he spoke slowly:

"I know how you feel over this, father, but—is it really worth while? Isn't there enough for two? Why not agree on an amicable division of what is found where the two claims cross, then abide by the decision of luck when it is found out for sure just which lode can be termed the true one?"

Jasper Howland spoke rapidly when he began, for he dreaded an angry interruption before he could make his meaning fully clear. But as none such came, he spoke more slowly, a flush rising to his face as those keen blue eyes watched him in stony silence.

Knowing as he did what a special pleader love had made of him, the young man grew confused and almost lost sight of the point he had hoped to make, finally breaking off with a sense of worse than failure.

For a brief space there was perfect silence, and painful though this assuredly was to Jasper Howland, he would have preferred its indefinite continuance, for he knew there was still worse coming.

Often before this he had seen Abner Howland angered, but never before had that anger seemed so nearly at a white heat, and never until now had those eyes looked upon his face with anything so nearly akin to mingled hatred and contempt.

"I knew it had to come, sooner or later," began Abner Howland, even his voice changed for the worse. "I knew it had to break out, at last, but I never thought it would come to me straight from you, boy!"

"I didn't—I was merely making a suggestion, father."

"And I am merely making a deduction, son," with a grim smile that was even harder to face than had been the fierce scowl it replaced for a

moment. "When were you with that Gillespie girl last, Jasper?"

A hot flush came over the unusual pallor which had an instant before marked young Howland's face, but now that the crisis had come, he could face it bravely enough, a touch of reproof in his tones as he spoke in his turn:

"Miss Gillespie is a lady, father, and since you have spoken so freely, I'll do the same thing. I'd gladly give all my present or future interest in the Daisy Belle, if I could only hear you kindly call her—a Howland girl!"

It was an audacious stroke, and Jasper had no means of knowing in advance just how that broad hint would be received; but matters had taken such a decided turn, now, that little he might say could make the situation any the worse.

Abner Howland gazed steadily into the face of his son while these words were being uttered. He waited a few seconds, as though to make sure Jasper had finished, then asked:

"Does that mean you wish to marry Louise Gillespie, sir?"

Jasper quailed the merest trifle at this cold manner of speech, but he was in for it now, and proved a true son of his father.

"Yes, sir. That is the dearest, purest hope of my life! To bring that to pass, I would gladly resign every other good in life!"

Now that the test had come, Jasper was determined there should be no room left for further misunderstanding, so far as his feelings and wishes were concerned.

Although his father's daily companion, and despite the fact that for years past they had been more like brothers than like sire and son, the younger member of that partnership was far from fully understanding his father, or that father's real nature.

From the very first Abner Howland had both hated and despised Herman Gillespie. He believed the man who bought in the Sure Thing Lode took that first step through a deliberately formed purpose of ruining him, as owner of the neighboring Lode.

Each day that had passed since the probability of the Twin Lodes eventually becoming one had grown to almost a certainty, this feeling of enmity had increased and strengthened, until now it was nothing better than a mania.

And now, to find the son in whose future he had felt such honest pride, was deserting his father for one of that hated name! Oh, it was hard, it was terrible!

But little of all this appeared in that cold, sternly-set face, and as the moments passed by without an angry reply coming to his boldly ventured hint, Jasper Howland actually began to hope for an amicable understanding, after all.

Instead, Abner Howland still gazed steadily into the face of his son, while a hand slowly moved to his belt of weapons, there to grasp and draw forth a revolver, reversing the gun in his hand as he held the polished butt toward his son, coldly speaking:

"There's only one way to fetch that about, so—take this, boy!"

"What do you mean, father?" asked Jasper, shrinking back and turning almost ghastly pale at this strange action and speech.

"What can I mean, son? That you shall never marry Herman Gillespie's girl while I live, so—take it, and—shoot, you rascal!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

AT very nearly that same time, Herman Gillespie and his manager, Milton Muldraw, were talking over the situation as viewed from their standpoint.

"I tell you flat, sir, there is far more danger in dallying than in acting," the 'sawed-off giant' was bluntly saying. "We are as fully prepared for the test as we ever shall be, while I've fair reason to think Ab Howland is beginning to have trouble with some of his men. Lack of ready cash, so I'm told."

"You mean that he is unable to pay wages promptly?"

"Just that, sir!" with a grin of malice. "And if trouble should come right now, it's odds in favor of a break-away on their part. See?"

"I see even a little further than you appear to look, Muldraw," retorted Gillespie, with a quiet chuckle. "If money is short at the Daisy Belle, will it not be even less plenty after another week or two of paying wages?"

"Don't forget, though, that we had him pinched mighty tight at least two different times before this, boss. He squirmed through, then, and he may contrive to make another raise this bout, too!"

"That will be still more difficult for him, as a matter of course. But, plainly, Muldraw, just what is it you advise doing?"

"Fetching the rising to a head right off!" came the blunt reply. "What's the use in wasting any more time? We've got the bulge on the Daisy, and can carry all before us with a rush, if you only think that way. And, since it's got to come, sooner or later, why waste good time?"

Herman Gillespie listened to this plain talk from his manager with grave attention, so far as could be gathered from his impassive countenance; but Milton Muldraw had long since given over all thought of reading the truth from this blank page, and waited the answer as his only certain hope of learning just how his proposition was received.

It was not because he distrusted his manager in the affair of the Twin Lodes, however, but simply because Herman Gillespie, through long training, used his face as a mask rather than a signboard.

So wholly did he trust this burly fellow, that he took no pains to disguise the truth concerning the Twin Lodes, as his next words amply proved.

"I'm not so certain that it is wasted time, Muldraw. Don't forget that other people have means of learning what you and I know; and if for that reason alone, I prefer going slow."

"About the rights of the dispute, you mean?"

Herman Gillespie nodded assent.

"Of course. I'd never admit as much to another, but *you*—that's different. And so—go slow I'm advising still."

"For how much longer, sir?" asked Muldraw, with a frown.

"Until Howland grows desperate enough to strike the first open blow," came the cool reply. "It must come from *that* side, as you ought to be shrewd enough to see without telling, man! If not—if *we* were clearly in fault there, as well—what would be the result? Simply this:

"It would be openly cried all through this section that the Sure Thing had no legal claim over the Daisy Belle, and that cry would just as certainly take many a stout fellow over to help fight their battles. Can't you see as much, Muldraw?"

"I know that a winner is never long in the wrong. I know that the loser will squeal foul play, for 'tis in human nature to do it. But I know just as surely that the crowd goes with the victory, and we can win that by simply trying."

"I give you full credit for believing in the advice you offer, Milton, but I must stick to the line I've marked out. Waiting on our side, until the Daisy Belle strikes a blow so openly that the public will see we are simply defending our claims."

Milton Muldraw, who seemed almost feverishly anxious to precipitate the fight which Silverado had for so long been anticipating, shifted uneasily on his seat for a brief space, then abruptly exploded:

"Look out that you don't catch a lick right where you live, boss!"

"What do you mean by that, Muldraw?"

"What if the Howlands are playing a game far bolder than anything you have given them credit for, so far, sir?"

"Once more, what are you driving at?"

"Well, it's a sort of tender point to rub with a rough hand, sir, but if a fellow only means your own good, why—"

"Will you talk straight, man?" almost harshly interrupted the owner of the Sure Thing, frowning sternly.

"I'll do it, of course, but I'm only warning you, sir, not retailing idle gossip simply for the sake of bearing myself talk. Then—Jasper Howland is trying to marry Miss Gillespie!"

With all his natural blunt coarseness, Milton Muldraw found it a far from easy task which he had set for himself, and after all his clumsy efforts to gracefully touch upon this delicate point, out it came in a rough lump.

The broad face of Herman Gillespie flushed redly, his eyes gleamed, and his full lips compressed tightly for the space of a single breath; but then he spoke in low, even tones:

"Had any other lips shaped such words, Muldraw, my fist would have sealed them the next instant. But *you*—that's different. You know better than to bring me such an infernal lie, without first making sure who deserves that penalty."

"That's easy enough, too," with a grin of malice, as he added:

"Go for young Howland, sir, and you'll not be far astray."

"You mean something more than you have ventured to say, as yet, Muldraw. Out with it, man!"

"Then, right here you have it, boss! The young folks are in love with each other, and if you don't clap a stopper on, and that mighty sudden, Jap Howland will file a lien on the Sure Thing by making your girl his wife!"

Herman Gillespie was cold and unmoved now. He had braced himself against what was coming, and even this coarse speech produced no visible effect upon his composure, unless it was to increase his dignity a bit.

"It was your due to receive a patient hearing, Mr. Muldraw, but now that common courtesy has been shown you, permit me to say just this: never again dare allude to my daughter after a similar fashion."

"But—if it's the naked truth?"

"A lie is never the truth, sir, and this foolish rumor is worse than a lie. For the future, then, remember to leave Miss Gillespie's name entirely out of this Twin Lode dispute."

Milton Muldraw accepted that reproof with as good a grace as he could muster on such short notice, but his sullen countenance told how unshaken his belief remained.

Herman Gillespie apparently gave that expression no heed, but with a return to his customary manner he gave his manager a few instructions before sending him back to his daily duties.

Not until Muldraw had left the house was that cold mask permitted to drop, but then the mining magnate betrayed how sorely his pride had been smitten by this rude hand, and bowing face upon hands, he sat in moody silence until a light footfall and a faint perfume warned him of his daughter's presence.

Still he did not stir until after Louise had gently smoothed his bowed head with a hand, and softly asked him what had gone wrong.

Then he lifted his head, gazing intently into her face, seeking to read there the whole truth of the rumors which had worried him of late days.

Louise saw something of this, and despite her efforts to the contrary, a soft glow would rise to her cheeks, and her eyes would droop before that grave, sad, almost accusing gaze.

"Surely that is not a blush for shame, daughter?" he said, one finger-tip gently touching that burning cheek.

"Father! How can you ask such a question?" almost indignantly cried the maiden, yet her eyes once more fell before that steady gaze.

His strong arms slipped about her waist and drew Louise down upon his knee, but he made no effort to lift the face which rested its cheek upon his shoulder, though this action averted her face so he could only see one flushed cheek, and that but imperfectly.

"I've been thinking of asking for a quiet talk like this, Louise, for a number of days past," the father began, his voice low and calm, but with something in it which warned the maiden of impending trouble. "One thing and another hindered me, but now—Child, do you know what ugly rumors are afloat concerning my daughter?"

Louise shook her head, but just then she dared not attempt to answer in words.

"They are lying rumors, of course, since they would seem to cast disobedience, if not actual shame, upon my daughter, Louise, but none the less they are being whispered about, and those who know you less thoroughly than I do might easily be deceived."

Herman Gillespie paused as though expecting an answer of some sort, but none such came, and after a brief silence he continued:

"These foul rumors have come to my ears through more than one pair of friendly lips, Louise. The bearers thought it nothing more than right that I should have timely warning, in order to take suitable steps toward silencing the base slanderers before their lying tongues could hatch up even more damaging falsehoods."

"Have you no curiosity, Louise? Why don't you ask me what I have reference to, then?"

"Because—Oh, father, pity me!"

"Because your fair name is so shamefully maligned, child?"

That was too keen a thrust to be borne, and springing to her feet the maiden impetuously cried out in self-defense:

"Father, I may have acted in such a manner as to merit your disapproval, but if any one dares couple my name with shame or disgrace, he, she or they lie—*basely lie!*"

"I know that much without telling, Louise, since you are my daughter, and the daughter of my sainted wife. But—the rumors are afloat, all the same, and I have determined to hunt down the authors of them, to be punished as their devilish malice deserves."

"Why, child, only to think of it! They actually dare assert that my child has fallen in love with that infernal Jasper Howland!"

"Father, don't—"

"I must say it all, now I have begun, Louise," cutting her short with an imperious gesture. "They even assert that you have been known to steal away from your home for the express purpose of clandestinely meeting the son of your father's bitterest enemy!"

"And, even more than this, rumor will have it that you are seriously meditating an elopement with Jasper Howland; but that is too much for human belief!"

"Father, let me tell you what—"

"First, Louise, let me tell you what I would do in case I had even the ghost of a reason for thinking anything of truth lay back of all this infamous gossip," sternly interrupted Gillespie, rising to his feet.

"I would hunt you both up, at the earliest possible moment, and when found, I would kill Jasper Howland before your eyes, then kill you for having publicly disgraced your father, and the mother who bore you!"

Without giving Louise time for answer or remark, Gillespie caught up his hat and hurriedly left the house.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LOVER'S PLEA CUT SHORT.

It need hardly be said that Jasper Howland declined to cut the gordian knot after the fash-

ion so dramatically proposed by his father, nor that their interview was of brief duration after that point had been reached.

It would be no easy matter to decide which one of the relatives suffered the most while those painful minutes lasted, but when they parted, it was on an amicable footing, outwardly seeming, at least.

But Abner Howland took notice that his son had given him no assurance as to the future, and while fearing the worst in that direction, he really feared to press the tender point too hardly, just then.

As for the lover, he rather suspected his father had devised some method of bringing about a final rupture, and possibly it was through the anxiety born of such a dread, that Jasper contrived to get word to Louise that he must see her, at their old rendezvous, if only for a few moments.

He was at the place of appointment long before the maiden could reasonably be expected, but at length, after many a troubled doubt and fear as to her coming at all, Howland caught sight of her dress, then sprung to meet Louise with a low glad cry.

Both lovers were strongly agitated, for neither had fully rallied from a far different sort of interview, and for the first few minutes the maiden was incapable of coherent speech, her sobs growing more frequent, her agitation stronger the more Jasper strove to soothe her.

Yet he knew that time was pressing, and that he ought to be improving this, possibly his last opportunity, after a far different manner; and as quickly as he could even partly tranquilize that almost hysterical loved one, he spoke rapidly, eagerly.

Howland told Louise of the words his father had spoken, only softening them a little, and then, showing her that their only hope for future happiness lay in taking matters into their own hands, he once more begged her to trust all to him, to marry him before stern words could be followed up by harsher actions.

Perhaps he showed little wisdom in letting his beloved know of the strong aversion felt by his father to her father's child, but Jasper Howland felt that he must speak out, and even to Louise he could not force himself into a naked lie.

Louise seemed to gain strength from his rapid speech, and when he at length paused for an answer, she also spoke of a family talk, and told Jasper how sternly Mr. Gillespie frowned upon even the rumor of their acquaintance.

Her words chased the warm flush of hope from his face, and young Howland cast a keen, apprehensive glance around them. If their meetings had been watched before, what security could they have that such an espial was not taking place even then?

But then his love gained the upper hand once more, and in low, eager words he begged Louise to have mercy on them both, and not help in destroying all their future hopes.

"It is all this dispute over the Twin Lodes!" he said, for one thing. "I could wish neither had been discovered—that the bottom might drop out of them both before another sun sets! What have they brought to either Gillespie or Howland but torment and trouble?"

"But so it will remain, Louise, unless you can pluck up courage to join with me in one bold effort to clear away these war-clouds. Will you do this, dear? Say you will do this, my precious!"

"Oh, if I only might, Jasper!"

"You may, you surely can if you only will, darling!"

"I don't—but how, Jasper?"

"So easily, dearest, if you can only bring yourself to look at the matter in the right light," eagerly declared Howland, hope once more entering both eyes and voice. "So long as matters remain as they are now, just so long will this enmity wax and grow more bitter, until—it is the only way I can see through without bringing bloodshed, Louise!"

The maiden drew abruptly back at this, bowing her head and covering her face with her trembling hands. Jasper reached forth his hands as though longing to clasp her to his bosom, but restraining himself, he added in hurried tones:

"It is truth, though my words grieve you so sorely, darling. Unless you and I can force a truce, which must quickly strengthen into an alliance of friendship in business matters as well, blood must surely flow, and after that—'twill be forever too late!"

"Don't—please don't talk—so!" faintly sobbed the girl.

"Only to let you catch a faint glimpse of what must surely come to pass unless you consent to aid me in bringing peace to our parents, my darling," huskily said the lover, sticking to the line he had marked out for himself before that meeting took place.

"Come with me, Louise. I have already spoken to Judge Harvey, and he will gladly help us out of trouble. Come with me, and when we are once married, all will be well with our parents as well as with ourselves!"

"If I dared—but no, Jasper!" stepping back with a gesture of passionate warning as he would have clasped her in his arms, anticipatory of

that glad yielding. "He would kill me! He would curse his only living child for—"

"Not so, darling," interrupted the eager lover, fearing to wait longer lest she repeat the vow she had made at their last meeting. "Blood is thicker than water, and when they once know we have taken an irretrievable step, reconciliation will surely follow."

"Never with father, Jasper. If you knew him as well—"

"I can judge him by my own father, Louise. I know they are both hard, stern, almost pitiless men where they think their honor is being touched upon, but—blood is thicker than water! They will come fully half-way to meet their only children, darling, when they begin to see that we have taken the only sure method of uniting the Twin Lodes and so making their interests identical."

But Louise Gillespie seemed incapable of taking this bright view of the case, and still she motioned Jasper back when he would have added the power of love's embrace to the arguments his eager tongue was presenting.

She was half-supported by one of those gray rocks, hands covering her bowed face, and Jasper Howland seemed lost to all else in his eager hope of winning the wavering girl over to his views.

Neither of the lovers saw those armed, masked shapes which were so silently creeping toward them, and when discovery *did* come, it was too late for Jasper Howland to offer resistance, for the very life of his beloved one seemed to hang upon his discretion!

"Steady, young hot-head!" came a harsh, menacing voice over the leveled barrel of a revolver, the muzzle of which was instantly turned toward the heart of the maiden who was struggling feebly in his grip. "If you kick or yelp, I'll send the gal to glory by Express!"

A cat-like leap had carried the masked ruffian to the side of Louise Gillespie, and before she could divine her peril, one strong arm held her helpless, while the other held Jasper Howland in check.

Before the lover could rally from that terrible surprise, he was assailed from the rear by two other masks, and while one held his arms fast, the other deftly tripped him up, laying him flat on his face, unable to do more than feebly struggle against his fate.

As this was being done, the fellow who held Louise in his grasp, quickly put up his revolver, using that hand to cover her lips lest she bring assistance through screaming in fear for her lover.

"Easy, my girl, and no particular harm shall come to either of you," the masked man hastily spoke, in additional warning. "No harm is meant you, but if any of your friends from town should chance along and take a notion to chip in—well, they'll only find the corpse of your sweetheart to tell 'em which way you've been run off!"

Unable to free herself from that muscular clasp, and with that strong hand effectually sealing her lips, Louise could only beg for mercy through her eyes; but he who had assumed charge of her, seemed capable of reading that language, and quickly added:

"On my honor as a road-agent, Miss Gillespie, I mean just what I'm telling you. No material harm shall come to either you or young Howland, unless such action is forced upon us by your own conduct. As proof, give me your word to make no outcry, and I'll set your eyes and lips free to—all working smooth, mates?"

"Nothing worse than a bit of kicking, but—lay put, critter!"

"Louise—spare her, and—"

Hoarse and barely articulate came these words, but the maiden recognized them, and wrestling herself free from the road-agent, whose grasp had relaxed through over-confidence, the maiden sprung away from him.

But not with thoughts of flight or for herself: all her care was for *him*, the being she loved above all else in this world!

Swifter still the road-agent leaped, and catching his prize just before she could reach those struggling figures, he once more covered her lips with a broad palm, speaking harshly:

"Give over, Jap Howland, unless you want punishment to fall heaviest upon this girl! Yield, and she shall suffer no harm, but keep on kicking, and—"

"Don't harm—I'll give up!" groaned Howland as he caught a glimpse of that loved form in that ruthless grasp.

"That sounds more like it," grimly declared the fellow, who seemed to take the lead in that affair. "I swear that neither of you shall be harmed, if you'll only submit to what can't be cured. We've come all the way here to take you two, and now we've sprung the trap—well, we'll hold, alive if we can, dead if we must!"

Shifting his position slightly, so that the lovers could see each other, and thus know that no actual injury was being done, the road-agent urged his fellows to make haste, lest trouble come from town.

"I'm not the only fellow who has been taking notes of what has been going on in this quarter," he added, with a short, significant laugh, "and

it may be that we will have to fight or to run for it, after all!"

"If we do, is it drop, or hold-fast?" asked one of his mates.

"Hang tight until the last shell is bu'sted, of course!" came the instant response. "I'd rather make a running fight against all Silverado than to face the boss without the game, after once fairly bagging it! You'd ought to know that, lads!"

"Don't— Do what you like with me, but permit the lady to go free!" huskily pleaded Jasper, as his captors rose up, leaving him disarmed and with strong thongs binding both arms behind his back.

"We're not open to make a trade, Jasper," said the leader, with a low, careless laugh. "I'm not so mighty sure but that the boss values the young lady even higher than he does your handsome self, too."

"Who dares— You shall suffer for this vile outrage, if—"

"And you shall suffer for vile threats, my pretty lad, unless you button up that lip right smartly," came the quick interruption. "If he says another word, mates, without being asked, clap on that muzzle and cork him up—too tight for any sort of use!"

Louise was too greatly frightened, too much prostrated by this rude shock, to offer resistance as her immediate captor half led, half carried her away from that spot, and almost before she could realize what was being done, she was seated in front of a mounted road-agent and moving briskly away from town, with Jasper Howland riding within sight, but helpless to rescue her from captivity, and only able to offer her faint encouragement through his eyes, for his limbs were securely bound, and a snugly-fitting gag had been placed between his jaws!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THERE'S MISCHIEF AFOOT.

ABNER HOWLAND was passing a far from comfortable hour with his own thoughts, sitting doubled up in a wooden-bottomed chair, heels caught on the front round, elbows resting on his knees, while his chin was upheld between his joined palms.

His blue eyes were staring at vacancy, but back of them his brain was working busily over the problem which, more than ever since this confession of love by Jasper for his arch-enemy's daughter, gave him such sore trouble and torment.

It had been bad enough before, when nothing more than money and money's worth was at stake, but now—

"I'd almost rather know he was a hog-thief!" Worse than this no man could say, from a Missourian's standpoint, and that Abner Howland could even think of his beloved son in such connection, much less put the thought into audible speech as he did just now, told how heavily that last blow had fallen upon him.

There was enough else to worry him, without that, surely!

Milton Muldraw had been fairly well informed when he told his employer that trouble was surely brewing at the Daisy Belle. For weeks past there had been more or less grumbling among the workmen, although up to date they had kept this discontent fairly well confined to themselves; but this could hardly be expected to last much longer.

For one thing, it had been nearly all outgo and no income for the past two months or more, and while this would have been bad enough had it merely concerned an ordinary working force such as it required for the proper running of the Daisy Belle, it was three-fold worse since so strong a "fighting force" was involved as well.

It had been hard struggling to satisfy their demands up to the last two weeks, but since then only the gravest sacrifices on his part had been sufficient to keep them well in hand. And now—the force on which he mainly depended to aid him in retaining possession of the Daisy Belle, had actually threatened to desert him unless their back pay was forthcoming without further delay, and with it a guarantee that their wages would be regularly paid each week when due, for the future.

Abner Howland never for an instant doubted what would follow any such wholesale desertion. Hating Herman Gillespie as he did, and with only a fierce scorn for Milton Muldraw, he felt assured that immediate advantage would be taken of his difficulties, and the Daisy Belle be "jumped" without further ceremony.

"And now—the boy must go back on me, too!"

Ever coming back to that keenest of all pangs!

All his little wealth was bound up in the Daisy Belle Lode, and to lose this meant poverty most complete. He had often declared that he would lose his life sooner, and those words had meant nothing more than naked truth; but now—he felt as though he could give up the mine for which he had fought so long and so desperately, rather than think his only son had "gone back on him!"

It was while tortured by reflections such as these that Abner Howland sat in his little house, having turned the mine and works over to his son for the remainder of the day, but he had labored in vain to see some dim ray of light through the darkness, some faint hope of still holding fast to his own, when a hurried tapping at the door in the front startled him out of his seat.

He quickly opened the door, to recognize one of his most thoroughly trusted men, Dick Norton by name, whose face betrayed sore trouble or fear of some description.

"Thank the Lord I've ketched you hyar, boss!" panted the miner, his words coming huskily like those of one who has made unusual haste.

"What now, Dick? Surely nothing's gone wrong at—not an attack, man?"

Fiercely came the last words, and a hand gripped a revolver-butt as the Daisy Belle owner started forward as though about to rush to the defense of his threatened property.

But Norton hastily checked that move, speaking as he cast a half-frightened glance over a shoulder toward the main part of town.

"No, boss, but I'm pritty sure thar's trouble brewin', an' even wuss then ef she come from the Sure Thing gang, too!"

"What? Not those devils who—not among my own men, Dick?"

"Jest them, boss, or I'm barkin' up the wrong tree," soberly declared Norton, at the same time edging himself inside the door. "Ef arybody was to be watchin', boss, why, mebbe—"

"Is there time to chatter, though?" asked Howland, at the same time drawing back far enough to shut the door and thus cut off all view from the outside. "Is it an open row, or only a simmering, man?"

"Jest a hatchin' of it up, I reckon, boss," came the quick response as Norton took possession of the nearest chair, like one who feels he has honestly deserved a rest for a time. "Thar's time enough fer to tell a bit, an' knowin' the boys as well as I now do, I'd a mighty sight sooner do the heft o' my chin'n' under kiver than out whar folks kin hear, mebbe."

"All right. Cut it as short as you know how, pardner. What are the fellows up to?"

Abner Howland never gave a more admirable exhibition of his nerve than in those few minutes. He could not tell but that utter ruin was covering him over at that very instant, yet he spoke and looked far more at ease than did this fellow who had comparatively nothing at stake.

Dick Norton scratched his stubby chin with an air of perplexity, as though hardly knowing just where he ought to begin his recital, but then he took a bold plunge right into the midst of the conspiracy.

"The boys is schemin' to sell ye out, boss!"

"To the Sure Thing gang, of course?"

"Jest them, an' never a lie, nuther, boss!" emphatically confirmed the miner. "They didn't none of 'em dast to count me in, I don't reckon, fer they never axed me would or wouldn't I."

"How did you catch on, then?"

"Through the two ears o' me backed up by a streak o' stud-boss luck fer once in my life! Was back thar, takin' a listen fer to see ef the workin's was gwine on in the Sure Thing—you know how plain it's gittin' so ye kin ketch the licks, boss?"

"Of course. Go on a bit faster, can't you?"

"Waal, thar I was a-strainin' the two ears o' me, boss, when I ketched somethin' as I hedn't the ghost of a idee o' hearin', an' that was a couple or three—I can't be dead sure jest which it was, fer—"

"Never mind as to that, Dick. Tell me what it was you heard," impatiently broke in the mine-owner.

"Word that thar was to be a meetin' come off over by the Blue Rock Holler, whar the boys was to make up thar minds jest when an' jest how to turn the trick," fairly spluttered the miner, startled out of his drawling rut by that fierce flash of temper.

"Who were the men you heard talking, Norton?"

"One was Dan Kelly, the other was pritty shore Nick Berdan, though it mought 'a' bin—"

"And they said the meeting was to take place at the Blue Rock? You are certain on that point, Norton?"

"Dead shore, boss, fer it hit me right then that mebbe you'd sort o' like fer to take a j'ine-in, so to speak, an' which is why I tuck keer to be dead onto it—see?"

Abner Howland rose from his chair at this, a cold, hard smile lighting up his face as he took a look at his revolvers, lifting the hammers far enough to twirl each cylinder around over his palm, to make sure all was in smoothly working condition.

"Well, I rather reckon I will drop in on the lads for a little bit, Dick," he said, speaking with ominous calmness. "I don't suppose they will be expecting me, but as I still claim to hold some slight interest in the Daisy Belle, seems to me I ought to be represented at the meeting whar that property is to be disposed of. Don't you reckon?"

"That's pritty much how I looked at it, boss,

an' that's the why I was ketched with sech a terrible hurry in comin' fer ye," said the miner, with a grin, rising to his feet and making ready for further traveling. "I'll show ye the way, boss, fer mebbe—"

"Not unless you want to take a hand in, Dick. Maybe the fellows will kick when they see me coming, and I'm asking no man to help me fight for my rights."

"I'm gwine 'long, boss," doggedly declared the miner. "Ef you say not, I'll hang abind, but—I'm gwine, all the same!"

Howland said no more, but grasped his hand with an honest fervor which brought a flush to that face, then the little house was left behind them, and they struck out at a rapid pace for the spot where the meeting was to take place: a locality well known in that section, from the double wall of blue stone which guarded the little valley.

When fairly clear of the town, and satisfied that no one was trying to play spy upon their movements, Howland mentioned his son, asking if Norton had spoken of the matter to him before coming after his boss?

"Never said nothin' to nobody, sir, fer I didn't know ef mebbe the young boss wouldn't hev somethin' fer me to do which mought keep me 'way from you ontel it'd be too late fer to ketch the boys at thar dirty work. An' so— waal I jest slipped out at the secret hole, ye know."

Norton spoke as though doubtful as to the reception Howland would give this admission, but the owner of the Daisy Belle made no comment.

He was well content that Jasper knew no'ing of this risky affair, for he was unwilling to have his son run chances which he himself was taking without a thought of fear.

The rendezvous mentioned was at a considerable distance from both town and mine, but the two men were both nimble pedestrians, and quickly drew near to the spot where so much might hang in the balance.

When so near that greater prudence became necessary, Dick Norton fell a little to the rear, permitting his superior to lead the way, as there was no necessity for his playing guide.

Then, just when Abner Howland was beginning to fear that their coming had been too late to hear aught, Norton sprang upon his back, gripping him firmly around the body, thus hampering both arms and bearing the mine-owner heavily forward upon his face, at the same time hastily crying out:

"Quick, hyar! I've got him, but—quick, or durned ef he won't be gittin' me, next!"

Taken so completely by surprise, Abner Howland could make but a feeble struggle against that foul assault, and before he could fairly rally from his surprise, other and still stronger hands were fastened upon him.

Five minutes later the owner of the Daisy Belle was disarmed, bound, and thoroughly blindfolded; but as that strong pressure relaxed for the time being, he burst out in a fierce storm of curses and threats against the traitor who had so adroitly led him into such a snare.

Naturally enough the Sure Thing gang came in for part of his savage objurgations, but then he was cut short by one of his captors:

"Honor to whom honor is due, Abner Howland. I'm Major Hold-up, very much at your service, and the Gillespie gang has nothing whatever—"

Howland burst into a shrill yell for help, then was grasped and gagged beyond the power of uttering another sound.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN ELOPEMENT, OR—WHAT?

IT WAS ON this same eventful evening that Milton Muldraw might have been seen hurrying toward the Gillespie residence, his every movement that of a man who feels he has important information to convey, or tidings which warrant one in dispensing with the usual ceremony.

This last was proven by his hasty entrance to that building, barely taking time to give a sharp rap at the door, then turning the knob and crossing the threshold without waiting for his summons to be answered in the regular manner.

Herman Gillespie was just opening an inner door which gave admittance to the apartment which served him for a home office, and the shadow of a frown marked his face as he recognized his manager in this unceremonious visitor.

At a glance he saw that something had surely gone wrong, and it is hardly too much to say that he instantly gave Muldraw credit for having precipitated that very trouble.

"Glad I found ye so sudden, sir, for— Nothing troubling you here, then?" began Muldraw, bluntly enough, yet stumbling before he could fairly touch the prime object which had caused him to make such a hurried trip of it that summer evening.

"What should be troubling me, Mr. Muldraw?" coldly asked the mining magnate, with eyebrows arching in haughty surprise.

"Then—how's your— Miss Gillespie this evening, sir?"

Really, the blunt-spoken, brusque manager was acting very oddly, just now, and Herman Gillespie hardly knew whether to laugh at this unusual embarrassment or to show his resentment in a more fitting manner.

"Miss Gillespie is enjoying her usual health, I presume, but permit me to add—"

"Then she's *here*, at home?" almost rudely interrupted Muldraw.

The father's hands clinched, but before he could strike, a premonition of the truth flashed over him, and instead of the blow there came the words:

"What do you mean, Muldraw? Explain yourself, or— Speak, confound you, man!"

But that old, dogged expression had come into the manager's face, and instead of giving the explanation demanded without further beating about the bush, he almost sullenly uttered:

"Is Miss Gillespie here at home? If she is, then all I've got to do is to ask pardon of you both, and go as I came, none the bigger ass, perhaps, but knowing that fact a bit plainer."

Herman Gillespie frowned again, but hesitated only for an instant.

"I have every reason to think my daughter is here, or, rather, up in her chamber, suffering from a sick headache. Tell me what makes you talk and act in such an unusual manner, and then—if necessary—I will go speak to Louise."

"If you can find her, better say, sir!"

"What—how dare you— Go on, you infernal villain!"

It was the father struggling with the cold, passionless man of business, just then, but Milton Muldraw was hardly in the humor for taking critical notes, or making a study of human nature, just then.

For one thing, he believed his long if not patiently waited-for opportunity had rolled around at last, and throwing off even the pretense of delicate consideration for the parent, he bluntly accused the child.

"All right, and go on it shall be, Mr. Gillespie. It's not more than a good half-hour since I saw your girl out at the edge of the hills, talking with Jasper Howland!"

Strong man though he was, and partly anticipating something of the sort, Herman Gillespie could not refrain from visibly flinching from this brutal blow. A blow, too, which did not give Milton Muldraw very deep regret to deliver, or his face belied its master!

"If you are lying—"

"If your daughter is in her chamber, as you said, sir, then I'll own up to having mistaken another for her," coolly interposed the manager of the Sure Thing Lode. "That ought to be easy decided, sir."

Herman Gillespie caught at the hint, and without another word hurried from the apartment, passing through the hallway to the stairs, up which he ran with greater rapidity than had been undertaken for many a long day.

Milton Muldraw smiled grimly as he listened to those basty footfalls, and his head remained inclined toward that quarter of the house until he caught the sounds which had died away: sounds of the same feet, but how differently they echoed!

"Got it—got it right in the neck, or I'm a liar!" the manager of the Sure Thing muttered, an ugly grin distorting his harsh features for the moment, but vanishing entirely before Herman Gillespie reached the door of that room on his return.

"Is she there, boss?" eagerly asked Muldraw, although that unusually pale countenance had already given him his answer.

"I was mistaken in thinking Miss Gillespie was in her room," said the father, with a brave show of composure. "Her headache no doubt grew better, and she—my daughter—"

"Then it was her I saw with Jasper Howland!" almost savagely cried Muldraw, springing to his feet as he spoke. "What did I tell you, sir, only the other day?"

"A lie then, as I believe it's a lie now!" sternly declared the father, fighting bravely against conviction in spite of his reason. "If you can show me—"

"I'll do just *that*, then, unless you're afraid to try it on!"

Gillespie shrunk a bit at this swift acceptance of his challenge even before it could be fairly spoken, but feeling that he run the risk of betraying the full force of his terrible doubts in case he attempted to argue, or even to talk, he motioned the mine-manager to lead on, and the two men hurriedly left the building.

The sun had been setting as Milton Muldraw reached the home of the man whom he meant to deal such a heavy blow, and now, as they hurried off in the direction indicated by the manager, twilight was beginning to deepen; and having less fear of his feelings being read by those curious eyes, Herman Gillespie asked Muldraw what cause he had for bringing such a ridiculous charge against a lady.

The answer came promptly enough, possibly because the manager knew he had right on his side, possibly through some other no less satisfactory reason according to his own light.

"Twon't do no harm now, I reckon, sir, to say that I've been looking a little out for some-

thing like this, of late. For one thing, you stung me mighty keen when I took the liberty to drop you a hint—"

"It was a hint, and I treated it as such. *This is an accusation*, and unless I find it has solid truth to back it up, I'll treat both it and you as such foul things so richly deserve!"

With cold fierceness came these words, and, bold rascal though he undoubtedly was, even Milton Muldraw shrunk a little as he heard them. But he rallied just as quickly, to gruffly say:

"All right, sir, and so be it! I'll make oath that I saw your girl in company with Ab Howland's boy, over near those rocks yonder, not over half an hour before I asked you where she was."

Herman Gillespie ventured no reply to or comment on this bold assertion, but as they drew near the lovers' rendezvous as indicated by Muldraw, the father drew a revolver and held it in readiness for swift service in case the worst should prove to be true.

Five minutes later mine-owner and manager were staring at each other, one sullen, the other with a ray of relieved triumph in his eyes, although his face still bore traces of strong anxiety.

"Where are they, sir?" he demanded, his tones unusually harsh, possibly through the restraint he was putting upon himself. "You swore you could show me the—"

"I swore they *were* here, and I stick to that same, sir. What object could I have in lying to you when, if it was a lie, all needed would be for you to ask your daughter to face me down?"

"But—they're not here now!"

"No; and I'm sorry for it too!"

Something in that tone gave Herman Gillespie a cold chill, and he stammered a little as he asked the mine-manager what he meant.

"It'd be bad enough to find your daughter here playing spoons with one of that cursed tribe, but—wouldn't it be even worse to not find them at all?" slowly asked Muldraw, something akin to sympathy for the man he was wounding so cruelly entering his voice.

Herman Gillespie gave a start as the full force of those words struck him, but then he bravely rallied, forcing himself to say:

"I still believe you have been laboring under a mistake, Muldraw. I know *my* child would never stoop so low—she is now at home, wondering why I am so long away!"

Gillespie started hastily in the direction of his home, and without a word Milton Muldraw followed his employer.

Although the sky was cloudless and the stars were twinkling brightly, the moon had not yet risen, and the light was too dim for reading the human face. If otherwise, however, Herman Gillespie would hardly have made the attempt, so dazed was his brain by this totally unexpected blow.

He was bravely fighting against conviction, but he really had scant hope of proving his faith well founded. He could feel the blow falling upon his head and his heart, and instinct told him his hurrying footsteps were only carrying him the more swiftly to the terrible truth.

Still, he was not to be checked until he had both questioned their one servant and searched the house from top to bottom. Louise was not then to be found at home, nor had she been there during his absence.

Milton Muldraw quietly waited through all this, though his frowning brows told plainly enough he counted it all a waste of valuable time, which could and ought to be better employed. But when, at length, the mentally dazed father turned to him for hint or consolation, he bluntly spoke out:

"I've given you your own way, Gillespie, rather than make harder feelings by saying flat-footed what I've come to believe is the solid truth; but I'd be no true friend to either you or your child if I was to hesitate longer, so—"

"Speak out, man!" almost savagely cried the tortured parent. "If you can throw even a ray of light over this horrible mystery, speak out!"

"Then—I believe your girl has eloped with Jasper Howland!"

Herman Gillespie staggered back as from a stunning blow. Yet some such fear had been haunting him from the very first.

He had fought it back then, but now that it found blunt expression through the lips of another, he could no longer ignore it, and after that one brief recoil, he rallied to say, with almost unnatural calmness:

"Abduction, maybe, but never a willing flight with one of my worst enemies. Come—it's time we were going, Muldraw."

"Where to, sir?" asked the mine-manager, almost awed by that strange, unnatural manner so different from what he had looked for.

But Herman Gillespie did not wait to answer questions. He left his now desolate home, and strode swiftly toward that of the Howlands, his bitterly hated enemies.

As before, Muldraw kept him close company, and his were the keen eyes which made a discovery, and his the hand which checked Gillespie even as the mine-owner lifted a clinched fist to smite that closed door.

"Wait, boss! What's this paper pinned up here?" he said, excitedly. "Where's a match to— *Holy smoke!*"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MAJOR HOLD-UP AGAIN.

WHILE checking his employer, Milton Muldraw was striking a match, and as he held this little torch closer to the door, a cry of angry amazement broke from his lips, for there was pinned up yet another card which bore the boldly written signature of the notorious road-agent!

Under the heading "To whom it may concern," there followed the words:

"Not at home. For further information, apply to
MAJOR HOLD-UP."

Herman Gillespie read these words at a single glance, before that miniature torch burned out. With a choking gasp, almost a groan, he staggered back, and would have fallen only for the friendly support lent him by a wooden hitching-post planted in front of the little building.

He seemed fairly stunned by this unexpected blow, and never seemed to doubt the truth or authenticity of that notice; but it was vastly different with Milton Muldraw.

"The cunning devils!" he burst forth, striking that notice with a heavy fist which sent a hollow echo through the deserted building. "It's a lie—all a foul lie, meant to cover over a still fouler trick!"

"That demon—my poor child in *his* hands!" huskily groaned the sorely smitten father.

Milton Muldraw strode forward and grasped Gillespie by both shoulders, giving him a fierce shake as he growlingly demanded:

"What! You're not swallowing such silly guff, boss?"

"I don't—what do you mean, Muldraw?"

"Mean? I mean that you're a bigger fool than Thompson's colt, if you think that Major Hold-up has had anything to do with this dirty job!"

"I don't—speak out, man, if you can offer any hope that my poor child—pity her, kind Heaven!"

"*Save her, rather!*" came the almost savage retort. "Rouse up and be a man, can't you? I tell you she's not in the hands of Major Hold-up at all! I tell you it's all a foul scheme of Ab Howland and his cub to down the Sure Thing while—"

"What? You really think that way, Muldraw?" eagerly cried the mine-owner, shaking off that awful stupor which had taken brief possession of him, body and brain. "You think—"

"That they're counting on scooping up the Sure Thing while you and I are cavorting like this, on a wrong scent—that's what I'm thinking, sir!" viciously declared the manager, his eyes fairly glowing like those of an enraged wild beast in the dark.

"But—Louise?"

"If she isn't playing in with Jasper—"

"Look out, man!"

"Well, settle it to suit your own taste, sir," with sullen calmness taking the place of that savage heat. "I'm going to look after the Sure Thing, if it isn't too late for that. I'd sooner die than be scooped up like I'm afraid— Coming along, sir?"

Even as he uttered that question, Milton Muldraw was moving away in the direction of the mine which he evidently considered in far more imminent peril than the missing maiden, but a sharp word from his employer checked the mine-manager.

"Wait, Muldraw!"

"It's rouse the town, then?" springing back, with swift willingness. "I was a fool for not thinking of that first-off, but— Eh?"

This time it was a strong hand which checked him, and after it came the swiftly-uttered words:

"That's the very last step I want taken, man! Can't you see? Even yet I can't believe that Louise— No! Say nothing of my daughter to any one, Muldraw, unless you should happen to meet either of the Howlands; but then—"

"I'll talk to 'em through my guns!"

"Not so," forcing himself to still more perfect composure, and still bearing in mind that dangerous weakness underlying his claims to the valuable vein of mineral which was eventually to make the Twin Lodes one and indivisible. "We must not strike the first blow, no matter what provocation is given. If shooting is to grow out of this—this outrage, 'twill be the father who does it, not the mine-owner."

"Have it that way, then, since you'll not listen to plain sense; but are we to stop here chinning until word is sent us that the Sure Thing has been raked in by those curs?"

"Of course not. Do you make all haste to the mine, and get the men ready for hot work, but hold them on the defensive until we know better what is really in the wind."

"And you, sir?"

"I'm going back to the house. It may be that Louise has returned during my absence, for— I'll follow after you, Muldraw, and be on hand when wanted, never fear."

Muldraw waited for nothing more, but struck away at a rapid gait, heading for the Sure Thing works, his whole care apparently being given to the property which he had managed for so many months.

Left alone, Herman Gillespie struck another match by the light of which he read again those boldly written words, as though he hoped to draw an inference from them which had missed his dazed brain before.

If such had indeed been his hope, it was quickly dispelled. There were only the words already recorded here, and brief though that light was, it lasted long enough to convince Herman Gillespie that the same hand had written this notice which had penned those other and longer ones, warning all Silverado against giving Mack Wilson harborage.

As the light went out, his hand moved as if to tear down that paper, but then came away empty. Why should he do that? Would it benefit, or injure his enemies to leave that notice standing?

Herman Gillespie did not pause long to decide as to that. Leaving the paper where found, he moved away in the direction of his house, now breaking into a run, then abruptly slackening his pace to a slow, reluctant walk.

In like manner his mind changed, and with it his hopes rose and fell. Never before in all his life had Herman Gillespie been so completely thrown off his balance as right now.

For the time being he gave hardly a thought to the valuable mine which might even then be passing forever out of his control. Just then fatherly feeling was uppermost, and all his thoughts were given to Louise, his only living child.

He could not believe that she would desert him for one of that detested family, and yet—how persistently would rise up the warnings which had come to him through the medium of Milton Muldraw!

Unless there was some truth underlying it all, why had not Louise positively denied her love for Jasper Howland when he, her father, made that thinly veiled accusation, only so few hours before this bitter black one?

"I wouldn't listen," he told himself, seeking vain consolation from that fact. "I frightened the poor child so badly that she couldn't—but Muldraw? Would he have dared swear he saw—Hell's blackest curses fall upon them, father and son alike!"

In vain did Herman Gillespie fight against growing conviction that this night was dealing him a far more bitter blow than the capture of the Sure Thing by his enemies. In spite of his efforts to the contrary, he almost knew that his child was lost to him forever!

It was this truly pitiable clinging to hope against reason that made Herman Gillespie so long upon the way back to his house, but the distance was not so very great, although the different dwellings were separated by the entire town, and Gillespie had chosen to pass around Silverado rather than invite attention at such a troubled moment by venturing through the main streets.

Even when at the front of his dwelling, the owner paused for a few moments in order to brace his sorely shaken nerves against what might be in store for him; but even this could not delay the end for long, and opening the front door, Gillespie called aloud his daughter's name:

"Louise! My child—come to your father, pet!"

Almost breathlessly he listened for an answer, but none such came, and with a sickening sensation weakening him, body, limbs and brains, the mine-owner staggered to the foot of the stairs, meaning to ascend once more to his daughter's chamber on the faint chance of finding her there asleep.

But it was not to be so.

Even as that blind, dizzy movement was made, dark shapes sprung forth from their place of concealment, and as one of their number flung a heavy blanket or shawl over Herman Gillespie's head, another pair of strong arms closed about his body, wresting him from his feet and casting him to the floor, where his spasmodic struggles were quickly overcome.

Hardly a sound was permitted to escape his lips, for in addition to the smothering folds of that muffler, a firm hand sealed his lips and even cut off his breath until his arms were securely pinioned, and those other hands were at liberty to employ themselves otherwise.

Never a word came from the masked men. They worked as though they had learned through frequent experience just how to accomplish the most with the least waste of either time or exertion.

So deftly and rapidly was their work performed that Herman Gillespie hardly realized his peril in time to fight for his freedom. Coming fully equipped for just such an exploit, the masked men had him snugly bound and gagged in a marvelously brief space of time.

Even then no word passed between them, the dimly-burning hall-lamp shedding light sufficient for gestures to supply the place of speech; and still leaving that heavy muffler about the head of their victim, the abductors lifted the

mine-owner between them, carrying him out the front door, around the house, then onward to a little clump of trees in which horses had been left in waiting.

One of the men mounted, his mate lifting their captive up, and both contriving to balance him across the saddle. Then, with a gesture which seemed to bid his comrade await his coming, the footman hastened back to the house, fastening something white to the outer side of the front door.

This put in place, he retraced his footsteps, and mounting a second horse, the two abductors rode rapidly away with their prize.

It was fully two hours later than this when Milton Muldraw, no doubt rendered uneasy by the failure of the Sure Thing owner to make his appearance at the works according to promise, came hastily toward the Gillespie place, and strode up to the front door, his gaze roving over the front of the building and a scowl deepening upon his face as he noted the lack of lights showing through windows.

"Has he gone to sleep, forgetting all but—Blazes!"

He struck the door a sharp rap, but jerking back his hand with a savage oath as his knuckles were cut by some sharp object. And not until then did he notice the sheet of paper which was tacked to the door.

Quickly striking a match, Muldraw read as follows:

"Gone to visit with a better man! Make no stir, make no move at the Sure Thing Lode without my full permit. If this solemn warning should be ignored, both Gillespie and the Howlands shall pay full penalty!"

"This, by order of

MAJOR HOLD-UP."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN AMBITIOUS MANAGER.

THE match lasted long enough for Milton Muldraw to master that brief warning, so far at least as the mere wording was concerned, and he seemed fairly dazed by the discovery.

Of all possible reasons for the delay in Herman Gillespie's coming to the Sure Thing, this would have been the last to occur to him.

"Gone to—what?" Milton muttered, mechanically, then striking another match, by the flickering glow of which he again glanced over those words pinned fast to the door with tacks, one of which had torn the skin from his knuckles and thus demanded his attention.

The second match went out as his eyes came to that signature, the second which he had seen since the last going down of the sun.

"Major Hold-up? A lie!" broke growlingly from his lips as he let fall that charred bit of wood, then smote the dimly visible paper with tightly clinched fist.

That blow reverberated through the building, and its echoes seemed to call the mine-manager to action more sensible than this.

"I'll look—maybe he's inside, or—there's the woman!"

The door gave way to his touch, and Milton Muldraw entered the hallway, glancing keenly around by the dim light of the lamp which was turned low; but the entry kept its own secrets, and he had no means of knowing how the gentleman he sought had come to grief almost exactly where his own feet were pressing just then.

"Gillespie! I say—Mr. Gillespie!"

His voice rung through hall and up-stairs, but no response came, and determined to learn all that house could tell him, Muldraw sprang forward to the door of the home-office, flinging it wide, but finding no person in the room, and nothing which could explain that strange vanishment.

Now thoroughly aroused, the mine-manager searched the building from top to bottom, carrying a lamp with him as he went, but with the same result: not a living soul was inside the house save himself.

Even the woman who served the Gillespies as maid of all work had disappeared, although he could not connect her with the vanishment of either master or mistress.

"She's took a night out, I reckon," muttered Muldraw, and hitting on what was the truth so far as the woman was concerned. "But the old man—it's a lie, and I just know it!"

His mind was going back to the notice signed Major Hold-up, but he could not, or would not, give that credence for a moment.

"It's all part of the other trick! It's all a dirty scheme to kick up a holy dust, so's they can scoop in the Sure Thing without a fight!"

Milton Muldraw replaced the lamp, and, to guard against possible accidents, he blew out the light, then strode through the hall and out at the front door, his first impulse, now that he had satisfied himself both father and daughter had vanished, being to spread the alarm throughout Silverado, and thus almost certainly foil the bold schemes which the Howlands, father and son, might be concocting.

But Milton Muldraw paused fully as abruptly as he had sprung forward, the stern warning given him by Herman Gillespie flashing across his memory, and then—

It was a vastly different thought which sent the mine-manager under the pine tree which grew in front of the house, and as he gained the dense shadow, he cast a swift, stealthy glance around; a glance which was surely not that of an honest man who had naught to conceal!

In those moments a powerful temptation had assailed Milton Muldraw, and he never made the faintest sort of resistance to it, either. He only asked himself if such a thing *might* be?

The human brain can work with marvelous swiftness under certain conditions, and during the several minutes which Milton Muldraw spent under the shadow of that pine tree, his was working at magic pace.

Among other things, he settled the matter of alarming the town in the negative, and leaving that signed warning still fastened to the door of the Gillespie residence, he turned his face toward the Sure Thing Lode, walking rapidly along through the night, but with thoughts that far outsped his feet.

To do him simple justice, Milton Muldraw really believed that all this strange work was owing to the Howlands, father and son, and that their primal object was to secure full possession of the Sure Thing property, and that without having to do open battle for it.

"They reckon it'll throw us off our base to find the boss gone and a lying hint like this to add scare to trouble," his thoughts ran in part as he hurried back to his post as manager. "First the girl, and then the old man! And all to be charged up against Major Hold-up and his outfit, eh?"

"Hands off! Touch not, or pay the penalty! Play the fool, while the other side gets all ready for playing trumps, i. e. Yes, if we are all monkeys, ready made to order!"

Milton Muldraw gave a low, grim laugh as these reflections came to his swiftly-working brain, but then he stopped short with a low ejaculation, muttering a bit later:

"What if 'twas so? What if Major Hold-up really has chipped in, and is playing for both the Twin Lodes? What—what would he do with them all if—suppose another hand took grip on the mines?"

It was but a variation of the temptation to which Milton Muldraw had yielded without argument when his burning thoughts sent him under cover of the pine tree.

In perfect good faith he had parted from his employer that evening, and made all possible haste back to his post of duty, firmly believing that all this was a cunning trick hatched up by the Howlands to redeem their own failing cause by securing possession of the rival Lode.

He had found all quiet at the Sure Thing, and up to the time of his leaving in quest of Herman Gillespie, nothing had occurred to quicken his former suspicions. But now—

"Pull, tinker, pull, tailor!" he grimly laughed as he once more hurried forward, at the same time banishing all doubts and scruples. "You can have the fun, but I'll rake down the profits, or know the reason why!"

After that there was no further hesitation on his part, although he was cool enough to neglect none of the precautions which had been deemed essential since trouble arose between the Twin Lodes.

He paused to give the signal, without which he would run the risk of been hailed by a rifle-ball, and made no further advance until that signal was properly acknowledged by the trusty hand whom he had left on watch when he hurried off in quest of their employer.

"It's all right, pardner," declared the guard, as the mine-manager came near enough for full recognition. "Nothing gone wrong down your way, I don't reckon?"

"No need to tell the whole country of it, is there?" gruffly uttered Muldraw, as he entered the narrow gate which opened in the stout stockade for his convenience. "Who's with you, Steinray?"

"Nobody but you, mate," came the response, but in lower tones. "Is anything gone wrong, then, that you are so cursed particular as to a word or a sneeze?"

This was a familiar address for a mere laborer to show toward the head manager of the works, but the two men had long been associates, and Milton Muldraw was never a man to stand much on his dignity while in company with his chosen friends.

"The lads?"

"All bunked in. Shall I call them up?"

Muldraw shook his head to the contrary, making a sign which bade Steinray say no more, then he stole silently away, making a brief but thorough inspection of their surroundings.

He failed to find aught to give him uneasiness, however, and satisfied that none of the men were thinking of picking up extra knowledge through playing eavesdropper, he returned to his friend, sitting down in close company, then softly speaking:

"Are you game for a big stroke, pardner?"

"When I know just what that stroke means, maybe I can tell you better," came the guarded answer.

Milton Muldraw took a minute or two for rapid reflection, then he briefly but clearly detailed the events of that evening, so far as he

comprehended them, then bluntly asked Steinray what he thought of it all.

"After you is manners, old man. You've had more time to think it out, I reckon," came the still cautious answer.

"I believe it's all a put-up job, with the Howlands at the bottom of it," came the confident answer. "They're getting ready to jump the Sure Thing, and want to make it a dead sure thing, don't you see, pardner? Mead to draw our bullets through holding the boss and his girl in front!"

Steinray shook his shaggy head thoughtfully. As yet he failed to take that same view of the case, as his next words plainly indicated:

"Don't forget those two warnings, mate! What were they meant for?"

"To help muddle us all up, of course! To make us puzzle over it until all was ready to drop in on the Sure Thing. See?"

"Not nearly as plainly as I'd like, though! What if it was really the work of Major Hold-up?"

"What if it was, then? There could be only one reason for posting any such warnings, and that is to hold us idle until all's ripe for jumping the Sure Thing. Don't it look that way, man?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then wouldn't we be worse than fools to play right into their hands? Whether those warnings came from Major Hold-up or from the Howlands, it's *delay* they are playing for. What is good for *them*, would be bad for *us*, wouldn't it?"

"Does begin to look that way, for a fact! What is it you propose to do about it, Muldraw?"

Before venturing a reply, the mine-manager bent closer to his mate, gazing keenly, searchingly into that bearded face. It was neither handsome nor noble, but it was one which satisfied Muldraw just then, and he spoke out without further reserve:

"All right, pardner. I know I can trust you, whether you have the nerve to join in or not, and so—listen!"

"The old man is out of the fight, no matter now just how he came so. I'm his manager and head man. It's my bounden duty to defend his property, and there's only one way to make sure of all that.

"I'm going to hold fast to the Sure Thing, of course, but besides that I'm going to strike in place of waiting for the other side to hit the first clip. Understand?"

"You mean at the Daisy Belle?"

"Of course. I'll hold the Sure Thing, and take charge of its Twin Lode to make all things even up," declared the ambitious mine-manager, winding up with a low, meaning chuckle.

Steinray began to see the point with greater distinctness, but he was not quite satisfied with the outlook, as his next words proved.

"What if those two warnings mean just what they say, though?"

"Then neither owner is apt to come back alive to put in their claims, and what's the matter with you and I stepping into their shoes?"

Their eyes met for the space of half a minute, then their hands joined in a firm grip, and Steinray said:

"I'll do it, for luck! When shall we fall to work, pardner?"

"The sooner the better, I reckon, just so we take care to have all ready."

CHAPTER XXX.

CAPTURE OF THE DAISY BELLE.

THE day was just dawning in the east, when a sharp hail rung forth upon the crisp morning air, startling the guard of the Daisy Belle out of a half-doze into which he had fallen at his post.

"Hullo, the Daisy!"

"Hellow yourself, and see how you like it!"

"I want to see your boss," added Milton Muldraw, stepping out into fair view of the stockade, but holding his empty hands where they could be seen and accepted as a token of peaceful intentions.

"Halt, you!" sternly challenged the guard, showing the muzzle of his Winchester over the top of those upright timbers. "Who sent you an invite, Muldraw?"

"Don't be a fool, man," came the impatient retort. "There's trouble brewing, or I don't want a cent!"

"So thar gen'ally is when you're on deck, Milt!"

"What's the row out here?" came a different voice, and the guard gave way to another form. "You, Muldraw?"

"Just me, Vincent," answered the mine-manager, recognizing the foreman of the Daisy Belle, or one who filled that important position when both of the Howlands were absent from the works.

"Well, what's wanting?"

"A fair, square talk with a white man, and I believe you are *that*, Fred Vincent, and so—"

"You didn't take such an early stroll simply for the pleasure of complimenting me, Mr. Mul-

draw," came the cold retort, both words and tone betraying how little respect or trust the Daisy Belle foreman placed in the man who was now confronting him. "What do you want, then?"

"Look out that thar hain't more abind him!" cried out a warning voice from inside the stockade, where the men enlisted for the Daisy Belle were congregating, roused by the sound of voices.

"I've come for help, not for fighting," boldly declared Muldraw, at the same time holding up his empty hands. "Both Gillespie and his girl are missing, and—"

"Missing?" echoed Vincent, in startled tones.

"Just *that*, and bad luck to it all, I'm saying!" exploded the mine-manager, with a gesture as of half-distraction.

"I'm sorry, of course, but what have we to do with *their* going?"

"Is either of the Howlands in yonder?"

"No, but—you surely don't dare accuse them of having to do with your trouble, sir?" sternly demanded Vincent.

"Not just *that*, but let me tell you how I found out what little I know, and then— Here you have it, sir!"

Milton Muldraw altered the real facts a little to suit his present ends, but told pretty correctly the circumstances leading up to his discovery of Herman Gillespie's vanishment, save as to their vain quest for Louise, or their visit to the Howland home.

"There was the warning, and it was signed by Major Hold-up. I'm not going so far as to say the major *didn't* sign it, you mind, but—well, I've searched pretty much all over for either Abner or Jasper Howland, and haven't come upon hide or hair of them!"

"What can either of those gentlemen have to do with it, sir?"

"That's what I'm here in hopes of finding out!" boldly cried Muldraw, beginning to cast off his disguise at last. "And so I ask you, Fred Vincent, as a white man, isn't this all a cunning scheme on their part to cripple us until—"

"Stop right there, Milton Muldraw!" came the indignant warning. "If you or any other dares cast such a foul hint this—"

Before he could say more, the trap was sprung!

From the rear of that inclosure came a warning shout, and as Vincent turned that way, he caught sight of a strong force of the Sure Thing gang, led by Steinray, closing in upon his men.

With a fierce curse he saw the cunning trap which had been placed for him, and whirling to the front he lifted his rifle, taking a snap-shot at the rapidly vanishing form of Milton Muldraw.

It was a cartridge wasted, for the mine-manager, warned by that signal shout, had leaped with all possible swiftness for the handy cover which he had already selected, and that bullet passed him by without touching even his garments.

Fred Vincent had time for only that one shot, for, as he turned with an encouraging shout toward his men, he was felled by a heavy blow, and then the rest was an easy matter for the Sure Thing force.

Taken completely by surprise, and lacking a leader, the men of the Daisy Belle gave hardly a show of resistance, and only half a dozen shots in all were fired, not one of which claimed a life. There were sundry blows given and received, but before that expedition was undertaken, the astute mine-manager had particularly warned his fellows against doing greater damage than they were absolutely compelled to, and his orders were carefully observed.

Five minutes sufficed to complete the capture of the Daisy Belle, thanks to all the odds against her defenders, and then Milton Muldraw in high feather over the perfect success of his audacious stroke, came before the sullenly angry foreman, to speak:

"Well, my pretty little cockerel, how do you begin to fancy the way this neat scheme of your bosses is panning out, anyhow?"

"I'll make you sweat for this outrage, Milt Muldraw!"

"Can't stomach the turn, eh? Well, you'd ought to have counted the cost before joining in. Now—where's Ab Howland?"

"Not here, else you'd never have shown up, you cur!"

Although his weapons had been taken from him, as from one and all of the Daisy Belle men, no attempt had been made to bind Vincent, and as he gave vent to this fierce retort, he instinctively put up his hands to ward off a blow.

But Milton Muldraw was victor, and hence in far too good humor for easily taking offense. He even laughed contemptuously as he rightly interpreted that movement.

"Don't trouble, Vincent. I'm not making war upon you. I'm after heap sight bigger game, understand?"

"You're playing a game that'll end in sending you up a tree, sir!"

"That's your say-so, now give me a chance, Fred. First, where are your two bosses hiding themselves?"

"Go ask them. I only know that if you'd thought they were either of them at the Daisy Belle, wild horses couldn't have dragged you within long gun-shot of the Lode!"

"You're wearing that string clean out, my friend," grunted Muldraw, turning away with a gesture of contempt, to address the disarmed men in a lump. "Do any of you fellows know where the bosses are, then?"

One or two sullen negatives were given, but for the most part only silence answered.

"All right, then! I'll wait until one or the other of them turns up to do their own talking. And now—business!"

"I'm going to turn you fellows free, to go to town with your tale, or to any other sea-port you may fancy better. I'm going to keep possession of your weapons, though, and if that includes any personal property, maybe you'll get pay for them by looking up the Howlands and putting in a claim."

"I'll come back to you for my pay, Muldraw," asserted Fred Vincent, having in a measure put his fierce rage under stern subjection for the time being.

"All right, my hearty! I'll be on deck, I reckon, whether it's you to call or those dirty whelps you have been serving so long."

"Now, let me tell you a fact. Nothing whatever of this would have occurred, only for the dirty trickery risked by the Howlands, father and son. I can prove beyond the possibility of a doubt that they first ran off Miss Gillespie, and then capped their work by capturing the old man."

"Take care, sir. You may be called upon to actually *prove* all this."

"I'll be ready when that time comes, never fear, Vincent. What I say now, I can and will prove to be gospel truth. And no man living will be more glad to face down those two vile schemers in open court, with all the rest of the world to give judgment when the tale is told!"

Milton Muldraw spoke with a blunt force and apparent sincerity which was not without the desired effect on more than a few of the defeated faction, and which even brought an anxious shadow to the face of Fred Vincent, in spite of his loyalty to his employers.

The mine-manager was quite shrewd enough to make a note of this, and sufficiently wise to let well enough alone.

With a gesture he caused the front gate of the stockade to open, and with another he gave the disarmed men permission to take their departure.

"Go your ways, my pretty lads," he said, with a low, satisfied chuckle, which was swiftly replaced by a stern earnestness, as Fred Vincent passed through that narrow portal.

"Don't make a bigger fool of yourself than nature intended, Vincent. So far you've played white, as I honestly believe, but now you are fairly warned as to the manner of men you have been serving, and if you stick to them longer, don't blame me if you share *their* fate."

"It's your turn now, but mine may come later, Milton Muldraw."

"It surely will come if you try to win back the Daisy Belle, sir. I've taken possession, and I mean to hold it as security for the old man and his daughter."

"I'm more than willing to make a fair exchange: to swap the Daisy for my employe, and his daughter; but if the Howlands try to get this back without first restoring *them* to their homes, safe and sound, I'll kill them and all who back them up, before I'll surrender!"

"Go tell all this in Silverado, if you like, but don't come back until you can come as solid friends, not enemies!"

CHAPTER XXXI

MAJOR HOLD-UP'S LECTURE.

FOR the first time since their capture had been so adroitly effected the owners of the Twin Lodes were brought face to face, and thereby given other food for thought than what they had been feeding on of late.

Abner Howland was the one whose quarters had been shifted, either permanently or merely for the purpose of satisfying some especial end of the captor who took the chief part in that shifting.

"Now, look your fill, the both of ye," he said, as the rival miners betrayed signs of amazement. "Convince yourselves that no trick is being played, as you've more than hinted, or, sure as my present name is Major Hold-up, I'll turn you both loose in a living ring where you can fight it out like wildcats!"

If Major Hold-up really hoped to convince his prisoners that nothing was owing to the other on this score, his fetching the two miners together was a mistake. Surprise instantly gave way to savage hatred from that instant, and hot words flew back and forth with more emphasis than dignity or decorum.

All that was said need not be placed upon record. Undoubtedly the words were intensely earnest and perfectly sincere, even though so decidedly mistaken when it came to a question of accuracy.

Major Hold-up listened like one overcome by a fierce fluency of speech which he feels unable to emulate, or even check the flow of; but finally he found tongue, and began using it in his turn.

"Well, of all the blooming idiots it's been my ill-luck to meet up with in a public life, you two are the worst pills I ever *did* strike!"

This emphatic opening produced the effect sought after by all public speakers, since it at once arrested the attention of his auditors; and standing in an easy position where both bound men could watch his gestures—for his face was thoroughly concealed by a hood of dark cloth which descended to his shoulders—Major Hold-up proceeded to enlighten his captives, bit by bit.

"I'm not so certain that I'm showing good sense in trying to bring hard, horse sense to bear upon you fellows, but that's the way my programme reads, and it'd be entirely too much trouble to alter the whole arrangement simply because you are born fools in place of sensible men."

"I never knew a gilt-edged idiot yet who had any doubts as to his being a modern Solomon for wisdom. Doubtless you both are feeling just that way right now; but if so, you're way off your nut!"

"You have both been acting the fool long enough, with a few months over. Not to put too fine a point upon it, you've played the ass ever since good luck came in sight to turn your weak brains—always provided you have any, which I really think is open to debate."

Major Hold-up paused, seemingly with the expectation of hearing a retort of more or less heat, but if such really was his expectation, it came to naught.

The only result was to divert the notice of the prisoners from each other toward himself, but even the fiery tempered Howland made no observation other than with his fiercely glittering eyes.

"Silence gives consent, and no defense is surely a confession of 'guilty, my lord!'" the road-agent laughingly declared, bowing to his captives with annoying cordiality. "All right, my darlings! Whether the black-capped judge tempers his sentence with mercy, depends pretty much on what the next few hours fetch forth."

"I'm overjoyed to catch you both when neither of you appear to be in a very talkative mood. For one thing, an argument always *did* make me sweat under the collar, and when I *do* grow hot, it's nine big chances to one little one, that somebody else is nearly certain to grow cold at the self-same time!"

Another far from comfortable hint, but Major Hold-up seemed to be enjoying the situation, however the case might be with those unfortunates whom he had set out to lecture.

The road-agent laughed back of his black hood as his gaze passed from one face to the other. That of Herman Gillespie was cold and hard-set, seeming almost as much marble as ordinary flesh and blood.

That of the Daisy Belle owner twitched and worked with seeming nervousness, but the jaws were squared and the nostrils pinched so tightly that it seemed as though a dab of flour had been given to that useful organ: always a danger-signal in a man like Abner Howland.

It would have been difficult to pick out two faces which were more radically different in looks, but Major Hold-up knew that the same sentiments were stirring them both—that his life would not be worth five seconds' purchase could they work their will on him!

"I've been waiting to see if solitude and your own thoughts for company wouldn't work out a cure, at least in partial degree; but when I fetch you together in order to see how the old thing works, what is the result? More wind-jamming, more back-capping, more crazy-be-foolishness than would patch Tophet a mile!"

"What is the conclusion? That mild measures don't work worth a cent, and that I've got to get down to sober business if I ever expect to make anything out of this little speculation!"

Major Hold-up paused again, like one who is judging what best to say next, but his seeming indecision lasted barely long enough to be noticed, then he resumed:

"The discovery and development of two such mines as the Sure Thing and the Daisy Belle ought to insure any town's prosperity, but how has it been here? Silverado has been handicapped instead of benefited. You two idiots have proved a curse instead of a blessing. And why?"

"I wish all problems were just as easy! Because you have spent your time in scheming rather than in working. Because you have hindered instead of helped. Because you are fools and knaves and human burros, rather than what you ought to have proved yourselves!"

"Hard words, do you think? Well, if each and every one of them has not been more than earned by you two fellows, then I wouldn't say so!"

"You might have proven yourselves a blessing to all this region, and that simply by keeping your proper places, working what was given to your hands, improving the blessings which fortune flung at your feet."

"But you didn't do anything like this, and why? Because *one* was not *both*, and *half* was not *all*! A hog makes an unpleasant bedfellow, they tell me, but he's a bundle of sweet-scented

eider-down in comparison with a human porker!"

"If I gave you a chance, no doubt you'd plead as excuse that the Twin Lodes threaten to merge into one, and then who is to claim the pot?"

"As an excuse, that is worse than no excuse at all, and you know as much without my telling. The mining laws provide for just such cases."

"Then, another even more happy avenue opened through the middle, but that was refused. And why? You are both growing old. One is growing bare-footed on the top of his head, the other is getting salt among the red pepper with which he is thatched."

"Did growing years bring an increase of wisdom? Devil a bit, and no party knows this better than you!"

"What easier or more natural solution could any reasonable person ask than was offered you two fellows, by the falling in love with each other of your only children? Why not turn the Twin Lodes into one, just as two souls with but a— Eh?"

Major Hold-up broke off abruptly as a fierce curse came from the lips of Abner Howland.

Up to this point both of the mine-owners had listened in sullen silence, knowing how impotent they were under present circumstances, but this was presuming too greatly, and the Daisy Belle owner broke bonds.

"Why, do you ask, curse you for another fraud? Simply because I knew what that would lead up to—*just this!* It's all an infernal trick hatched up by Herman Gillespie, yonder: You lie if you try to say different, and *me*—I'll die by inches before I yield a single inch to either him or to his!"

"You are barking up the wrong tree, Howland," quickly answered the road-agent. "This is none of Gillespie's pie, but my own particular pudding!"

"That is a lie, coming from the lips of a born liar," coldly said the owner of the Sure Thing. "All this mad farce comes from the two Howlands, but they are wasting their time and talents."

"I can guess at their hopes, but they are worse than vain. Dearly as I love my only surviving daughter, I'd far sooner see her fill a coffin than to disgrace her sainted mother by forming an alliance with Jasper Howland—the cowardly son of a still worse father!"

"I'll even up with you for all this, Gillespie!" Major Hold-up glanced from face to face as each man spoke, but made no attempt to check either. Then, as silence fell, he broke it with a low, mocking laugh before saying:

"How much of all this is straight goods, I wonder? Do you honestly believe what you say, gentlemen?"

"I know Gillespie is bossing the job, but—"

"It surely is a vile plot hatched up by yonder villain!" sternly cried Gillespie, cutting his rival short.

Major Hold-up gave a gesture as of impatient despair, but still attempted to carry his point, asking:

"You actually mean this, gentlemen? To you, Gillespie: even to gain your liberty and possession of your Sure Thing, you refuse point-blank to let your daughter wed with Jasper Howland?"

"I'd rather see her dead and in the grave!"

"And I'd smother my boy with curses if he was to buckle-to with any one of that tribe!" no less fiercely declared Howland.

Major Hold-up gave another odd laugh, shrugging his shoulders as he said in turn:

"All right, gentlemen. I've honestly given you a chance to save both yourselves and your beloved Twin Lodes, but since you decline to take advantage of my friendly offer, I'll turn elsewhere."

"For, mind you, I've fully made up my mouth to have a wedding come off, and—well, we'll see what we will see!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

COURTING BY PROXY.

WITH these words, Major Hold-up clapped his hands together, and an armed guard entered to receive his orders. His face, too, was completely hidden by the regulation hood, and he stood in silence while his orders were given by his chief.

"Take the little fellow back to his place of rest, my lad," said Major Hold-up, still further pointing his meaning by motioning toward the Daisy Belle owner.

Abner Howland was promptly marched away, and the road-agent barely waited long enough to add:

"Possess your soul in patience, Mr. Gillespie, for your turn shall come right speedily, I pledge you my word as a—road-agent!"

Leaving the Sure Thing owner to digest those words as best he might, Major Hold-up followed after the guard who had assumed charge of Abner Howland, and with his own hands aided in forcing a snug gag between the prisoner's jaws, thus rendering speech an impossibility so far as he was concerned.

"Sorry to handle you without gloves, my dear

fellow," the road-agent declared, with admirably assumed regret in his tones. "But you so flatly declined to compromise, that nothing is left me but plain business."

"You likewise expressed a belief that I represented a shameful fraud, didn't you? well, just make good use of your eyes and your ears for the next few minutes, and you may possibly catch a new wrinkle or two! Ta-ta, my dear fellow: see you later on!"

The dim light which had been burning in that particular portion of the cavern was extinguished, and Abner Howland felt himself picked up and borne rapidly for some little distance, to be placed upon his feet with back supported against a cold rock wall, though still left in utter darkness.

He could just catch the soft shuffling of human feet as his bearers left him alone, and then he fell to wondering what was coming next?

This doubt did not last very long. As though a screen of some description had been drawn away from before him, a dim light suddenly made itself perceptible, then increased until the mine-owner could distinguish quite clearly all that lay before him.

Abner Howland gave a start and tried to cry aloud as he recognized the face and figure of Jasper, his son, lying on a rude pallet not very far ahead of where he was so helplessly standing!

This was his first intimation that his son had likewise fallen into the hands of the notorious road-agent, and the discovery agitated him so greatly that, in trying to spring forward, he destroyed his balance and fell heavily to the rocky floor.

With some little difficulty, thanks to his thoroughly hampered condition, Abner Howland succeeded in lifting himself to a sitting posture, but anything beyond that was out of his power.

A change of scene had taken place during his downfall, and now, as he looked, he saw that Jasper was no longer alone.

The young man had assumed a sitting position, which fact showed Howland that both hands were bound behind his back.

In front of him stood two figures, one that of Major Hold-up, the other more retiring, and garbed in feminine attire.

Abner Howland gave another start as he saw this, and a savage cath rose in his throat as he thought of Louise Gillespie. This surely was her, and now—what did it all mean?

"Regret this intrusion, young man, but when a body can't well act differently, what's to be done? Simply apologize for the inevitable, and let it go at that, of course!" began the road-agent, with the same off-hand manner as he had displayed when in the presence of his older prisoners.

"Say your say, and leave me to myself, you scoundrel!" sternly said Jasper, after a fleeting glance at that feminine form, whose face was similarly hidden by a hood-like mask.

"Decidedly frank, if not positively courteous," came the retort in cool, even careless tones, at the same time waving a hand toward the second mask, to add: "Permit me to introduce you to my sister, Mr. Howland."

"Charmed to form your acquaintance, Mr. Howland," said a musical voice, accompanied by a graceful courtesy. "Of course I could wish it was formed under more agreeable auspices, yet—"

"Needs must when the long-tailed gent climbs into the box-seat, you understand?" Major Hold-up supplemented, with a light laugh. "And now, having done the polite, let's fall to sober business."

"Of course I am powerless to hinder, sir, but there is only one manner of business into which I can or will enter with you of my own free will," interposed the prisoner.

"And that is?"

"Payment in full for this vile outrage, sir!"

"Well, the time may possibly come round when you can make such a demand, in such a manner that I'll feel compelled to grant you your ardent wishes, my dear fellow; but just for the present that is entirely out of the question."

"Then the quicker you say your say, the better I'll like it."

"Don't forget that we are in the presence of a lady, Mr. Howland."

"Are we? I thought you introduced her as your sister?"

Major Hold-up gave a sharp exclamation at this retort, but his sister not only arrested his arm by a touch, but laughed softly, mellowly.

"Nay, not on my account, brother," she said, in addition. "Since you have deprived him of all other means, it would be a shame to deny him full liberty of speech."

"That saves you sore bones, if nothing worse, Howland," curtly said the road-agent, "but don't impose upon good nature *too* far, or even the little lady might fail to keep your carcass entire!"

Jasper said nothing in return, but suffered his eyes to pass from brother to sister, and they lingered there, while Major Hold-up added:

"You've already gained a tolerably accurate idea of how matters stand out here, Howland."

but it can do no particular harm to run them over, roughly.

"I captured both yourself and Miss Gillespie, as you know. I likewise contrived to carry off both your father and Herman Gillespie without another soul in all that section being any the wiser for it. And I hold one and all at my disposal, here in this natural prison.

"I have just come from an interview with the old gentleman, during the course of which I broached the subject of your marriage with Miss Gillespie, but—"

"What?" ejaculated Jasper, with a start of amazement.

"Precisely what I say, young man. I suggested that method of smoothing over the Twin Lode feud, but neither gentleman seemed to fall in love with my idea; in fact, they both swore that death to their children would be infinitely preferable in their estimation."

"You malicious devil!" huskily cried the young man. "You've made a bad matter worse by— You've destroyed my last hope!"

"I'm very much afraid that I did just that," coolly admitted the road-agent, with an echo in his tones that certainly failed to express very deep regret, to say the least of it. "But as to your last hope having been ruined, permit me to respectfully doubt just that much."

Young Howland said nothing, but his head bowed, and he uttered a low, partly smothered groan. This fresh blow seemed more than he could bear up under.

"Well, business is business, dear boy, and I'm here to accomplish a bit of that very thing. So—open your ears, please!"

"For my part, I'm free to confess that since having the honor of playing host to the really adorable Miss Gillespie, I've fallen over head and ears in love with her, and—"

"Silence, you foul-mouthed villain!"

"When I have finished saying what brought me here, Mr. Howland. If you prefer being gagged to listening without, I'll call some of my men to accommodate you. Shall I do just that, then?"

"No, but—name her not, I beg of you!"

"Unfortunately, though, I really must. Miss Gillespie is of the right age to be married, and since you cannot wed her, I'll step into your shoes. If for no other reason than to keep her from wearing the willow, don't you see?"

"Wouldn't it be just as well to tell Mr. Howland of the happy fate which is in store for him, brother?" gently hinted the woman.

"I can crowd all that into little more than a single mouthful," was the laughing response.

"And right here you have it, Jasper!"

"This foolish sister of mine has tumbled deeply in love with you, pardner, and being too bashful to say as much herself, has asked me to do her courting, as proxy. So—will you accept her as a true, faithful, loving bride, Howland?"

Through all this the young man had seemed half dazed, but as this question came so bluntly, he blurted out:

"You're crazy, both of you! Will I? Never—I'd die, first!"

With a swift gliding step, the woman moved nearer the prisoner, and lifted her mask in order to show her face to his startled gaze, at the same time speaking in low, musical tones.

"Am I such a fright, then? Will it be so hard to accept me as a true and loving bride, Mr. Howland?"

There was a brief pause, then Jasper coldly answered:

"You are not Louise Gillespie, and I can never wed any other woman than the one I love. I must respectfully decline your offer, madam."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MAJOR HOLD-UP PROPOSES.

UNTIL Jasper Howland spoke so firmly, his father had never for an instant doubted but that this woman was the daughter of his hated enemy, Herman Gillespie.

He felt that he was being forced to witness some sort of farce, the ending of which would insure the triumph of those cunning schemers, and at the same time overwhelm him with ruin. For, even should Jasper yield to either threats or blandishments, the father would never consent to profit by his son's shame.

But now, as Jasper so coldly gave his refusal, even as the woman introduced to him as Major Hold-up's sister, Abner Howland knew that his suspicions were wrong, so far as concerned this woman's being Louise Gillespie.

Major Hold-up took that cold refusal very easily, so far as outward appearances went, and betraying no chagrin or anger, spoke out briskly:

"Well, having performed my guardian duty, young people, I reckon I'll leave you here to talk it all over. Be good to each other, I beg of you. Coax him tenderly, sister, for I'd a great deal rather have Jasper Howland as a live brother-in-law than as a dead rival!"

"You are going, brother?"

"Going a-wooing, yes," with a low, amused laugh as he took note of Jasper's start at those words. "Don't try to play dog in the manger,

my dear boy! You can't have the divine Louise, but there is my sister, waiting and more than willing to bind up your wounds."

"Quiet, brother!"

"It's gospel truth, all the same, so why not say it? Would you rather meekly accept his refusal, and turn to father instead of son? Remember that it must be one or the other, to make sure of the Daisy Belle!"

With this blunt speech Major Hold-up turned away and took his departure, almost immediately issuing orders which had Herman Gillespie for their subject.

The owner of the Sure Thing Lode was treated almost precisely as Abner Howland had been before him, and finally he was left sitting on the stony floor, with his back propped against a cold rock wall, in utter darkness.

His limbs were bound so thoroughly as to prevent his moving in the slightest, and a gag had been forced into his mouth, not sufficiently tight to prevent free breathing, but far too much so for him to give an alarm or to express aught of the powerful emotions by which he was assailed only a few minutes after his guards had left him thus.

With him, as with Abner Howland, a growing light came to dispel the utter darkness which had until then reigned in that portion of the cavern, and, like Abner Howland, the first figure Herman Gillespie recognized was that of his only child.

Escorted by Major Hold-up, still wearing his ample mask, Louise Gillespie came into the small stone cell, so near to where her father was confined that his starting eyes could note her unusual pallor; but he vainly tried to cry out or to otherwise attract her attention, and the poor girl had no means of knowing how near she was to her parent.

Shrinking away from the road-agent, who made no effort to further constrain her, Louise sunk down upon the stony floor of the cave, her head bowed, hands lying in her lap with fingers tightly interlocked.

To the father who was so helpless to lend his loved one aid or even moral support in this, her peril, the poor child seemed to be utterly broken down in spirit and in body.

For a few moments Major Hold-up stood with folded arms, gazing down upon his helpless captive, possibly gloating over her still wondrous beauty, or, it might be, pondering his wisest method of attack.

"Can you guess why I have brought you here, Miss Gillespie?" were his first words spoken in the father's hearing.

There came no reply, unless the faint moan given by Louise as she shrunk slightly away, be taken as such. And after waiting a few moments for something more intelligible, Major Hold-up spoke again:

"After all, such little points matter but a trifle, and so I'll let them pass by for the time being. Now—your closest attention, pray, my very dear young lady!"

"For many months past I have been watching affairs in and around Silverado, and not the least of my interest has been felt concerning the Twin Lodes and their management."

"This has been abominable! No milder terms will do justice to the bald facts. And in consequence, what ought to be producing an independent fortune for each of the owners, has been piling up debts, and making poorer instead of richer the Howlands and the Gillespies."

"All this I saw, and after wondering awhile why in the name of common-sense the Twin Lodes were not welded together in bonds as strong if not exactly as holy as those Jasper—"

Louise uttered a low, pitiful cry, and Major Hold-up instantly cut himself short, although he made an impatient gesture as he spoke again:

"Have you not cured yourself of that folly, Louise? Have all my arguments gone for nothing, then?"

"Don't—I love him!" sobbingly cried the maiden, bowing face in hands, her lithe figure shivering with powerful emotion the while. "Kill me, if nothing less will satisfy you, sir, but don't—my love!"

Sobs choked her voice, and Major Hold-up stood silently staring at her bowed form for several minutes.

All of this Herman Gillespie could see and hear, and he strove his level best to burst his bonds or to eject that gag from his jaws. If he could do nothing more than curse at that infernal road-agent, and call upon his darling child to stand firm against all threats, it would be better than nothing!

But the tools of this Major Hold-up had performed their work well, and his vain efforts ceased only when he again caught the sounds of that detested voice.

"So far from visiting you with death, my angel, no mortal on earth would fight more desperately in your defense than the man who is talking to you this minute! And why? Simply because I have learned to love you as I never thought to worship one born of woman!"

"Love?" echoed Louise, with a flash of old-time spirit in voice and in face as she lifted her head to meet his gaze. "Is this a proof of love? Is it the part of love to so shamefully abuse the power—oh, father! Why must this be?"

"You love this father on whom you are calling, Miss Gillespie?"

"Love him? Am I not his only surviving relative?"

"Delighted to hear that much, I am sure," retorted the road-agent, with a brief, meaning chuckle which caused the maiden to shrink back once more, that short-lived flash of spirit gone. "I'll explain just why this fact tickles me so immensely, but just now—this beloved parent of yours!"

"He could have insured your future happiness through life, and at the same time put an end to this Twin Lode feud, simply by making friends with the Howlands, and letting Jasper marry you. Did he do this? Did he not, on the contrary, fiercely vow that he would far rather see his only child dead and filling a grave?"

Louise faintly sobbed, but no denial passed her lips. How could she deny what she so bitterly knew was plain truth?

Major Hold-up seemed to feel that his cue point was fairly made, and in a self-satisfied tone he spoke again:

"And now I'll tell you why I'm pleased to know my future bride has but this one living relative. In case aught should befall him, would not you become sole heiress to the Sure Thing property?"

Herman Gillespie felt a cold thrill flash over his person as he caught the thinly disguised threat which underlay that bland query. He began to see toward what point the road-agent was drifting, and it did not increase his love for that masked gentleman, be sure!

"There is no particular need for my repeating the avowal of love with which I have already honored you, little lady," lightly added Major Hold-up, "but I do repeat it, nevertheless. I love you, and I have determined to make you my wife: freely, if you are wise, but my wife at all hazards!"

"I will not—I cannot!"

"You will, and you can, through my aid, little lady. If cold reason fails to convince you, then I shall not hesitate to employ other means. Among them—your loving father!"

"My father? What of him? Oh, sir, if you would only—"

"His fate lies in your hands, Miss Gillespie," said the road-agent, speaking with a touch of harsh decision which had been absent until that moment. "If you both yield to what you are neither of you able to hinder, well and good!"

"Although your marriage to me may be a forced one, I pledge you my word of honor as one who has learned to love you very dearly, that you shall never have cause for regretting the important step into which you have been forced so sorely against your will."

"Remember that the devil is never so utterly black as painted, and that a true woman's devoted love has saved even worse lives than that of Major Hold-up."

"But I don't—it can never be, sir!"

"There speaks the father rather than the child, I imagine," said the road-agent, with a short, unpleasant laugh. "Well, when a man is past making the best of a bad bargain, it is high time he fell to shuffling off this mortal coil!"

"But—I love Jasper Howland, sir!" faintly cried Louise, seemingly beside herself with despair. "I love him better than life!"

"Yet I'll go bail time will hear you vow that same measure of adoration for the husband fate is about to bestow upon you, Miss Gillespie!" coolly asserted the road-agent, with a following laugh.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GRANTED A BRIEF REPRIEVE.

As these words passed his lips, Major Hold-up stepped forward and assisted the maiden to arise to her feet, then led her away, the light shortly after vanishing as well, leaving Herman Gillespie to chew the bitter cud of fancy in complete darkness.

But he was not long left thus. Felt but unseen hands came to lift him bodily and bear him away through the darkness, until instinct rather than any actual senses told him he was once more in the stone-walled prison where he had already passed so many painfully-anxious hours.

Other sounds followed which told him he was not doomed to suffer solitary confinement, and with a yearning at his heart he strove to call out the name of his daughter; but in vain.

That gag still hampered his organs of speech; and he could only make a low, unnatural moaning sound deep down in his throat.

That was almost immediately echoed back, but no word came to cheer him, and he could only hope—and fear!

But this suspense was of no great duration. A light began to make itself visible, and then Herman Gillespie saw who it was he had been trying to speak to: Abner Howland, bound and gagged like himself!

Shortly after, this dim glow grew brighter, and then Major Hold-up came within their range of vision, bearing a light which he placed upon a point of rock which jutted out from that wall midway between the two mine-owners.

This done, the road-agent clapped his hands sharply together, and in a very few moments more, five other forms entered, two of them bearing Jasper Howland between them, bound and helpless, while the woman whom he had introduced as his sister, supported Louise Gillespie on one of her arms.

The poor girl stared about her like one literally dazed, but then, as she caught sight of and recognized her father, she broke away from the woman, and with a sobbing cry sunk to her knees at his side, clasping him in her arms and weeping upon his heaving breast.

"Stay her not, sister!" cried Major Hold-up, with a benignant wave of his right hand to match his deep-pitched tones. "Filial affection! Ah, would that circumstances permitted us to—ahem!"

"Well, I would if I were you, brother!" almost spitefully cried his sister. "Can't you leave off shams for once in your life?"

Major Hold-up laughed lightly at this blunt reproof, and said:

"I'm not so sure but what you are taking the correct view of it, after all, sister. Sentiment and business make a mighty inconvenient mix, as a general thing."

"Then why not get down to business?" Evidently the major's sister was far from feeling in a genial mood just then, which might possibly be owing to the manner in which Jasper Howland had received her none too coy offer of love and marriage.

Let that be as it may, the road-agent showed that he was not too proud to act upon the advice given by a woman, for after sharply clearing his throat, he spoke to his captives:

"I've already placed the situation pretty fairly before you, Messrs. Holland and Gillespie. If I haven't granted you very long a time in which to review this same situation, it was because I thought we might save valuable time in the end by telling you precisely what has been marked on the programme."

"You had the chance of a more than comfortable fortune offered you in the Twin Lodes, whether worked as twain, or joined together as one."

"You declined to improve the golden opportunity as you ought, and in addition to making arrant fools of yourselves, you have proved a curse to Silverado and her natural advantages!"

"Come to the point, brother!" impatiently said his sister.

"Which I am doing, my dear, if you don't throw me clean off the right trail," just a little sharply retorted the road-agent. "Pray subside, and permit me to take my way after my own way, will you?"

The woman fell back a bit at this reproof, and glancing deliberately from man to man, Major Hold-up spoke again:

"I repeat it, Howland, and you, Gillespie: the one chance of your mutual life was offered when your children fell in love with each other, and wanted to heal over all old sores by—How?"

"By marrying, and thus uniting both race and property!"

"As we surely would have done, only for your evil interference!" said Jasper, with a suppressed groan of mingled rage and despair.

Major Hold-up instantly dangled a prepared gag before the young man's eyes, and seeing how worse than futile would be any further speech or remonstrance on his part, Jasper locked his teeth for the present.

"These are the plain facts, gentlemen, now for the deduction. I'll use simple language, so that you will have no room left for doubting which horn of the dilemma looks the least uncomfortable."

"You know how I chipped in, and how I have taken each and every trick up to the present moment. I have you all in my power, and never a mortal outside of this snug refuge can give more than a blind guess as to how and why so many of Silverado's prominent citizens have left town so suddenly."

"All this is simply the rough husk, but now comes the kernel: sour or sweet, just as you are wise or foolish!"

"What you declined to accept, we are resolved to improve to the utmost. Since Louise was not permitted to wed Jasper, they shall each be blessed with a fitting mate, and there shall be two weddings in place of simply one!"

Vailed though this statement was, its full meaning could not be mistaken, and even Louise Gillespie and her father turned their eyes upon that masked arbiter of their fate.

"Sounds rather previous, do you think? Well, that is right where you make a mistake, my gentle friend! There is nothing impossible to a man of strong will, and when he is backed up by a lady like my sister—it becomes a lead-pipe cinch!"

"The power of life or death may lie in your hands, sir, but you have no power over my will," coldly declared Jasper Howland, the only one of the masculine captives with the power of speech left him.

"Do you really think so, son?" mockingly asked the road-agent. "Of course it may turn out that way, but—do you love your father?"

"Why do you ask that, sir?"

"For good and sufficient reasons, of course. Will you give me a definite answer, then?"

"I am not ashamed to say that I do love my father, sir! There is only one living person whom I love better."

"Meaning yourself, of course?"

"Meaning Louise Gillespie, you cur!" almost fiercely flashed the young man. "And if you harm so much as one hair of either head, I'll kill you, though you try to hide at the very ends of the earth!"

"Cheap fireworks, my dear son," retorted Major Hold-up. "As for killing or harming Louise Gillespie, I have a far better use to put her to; my loving and beloved wife!"

"Never, sir!" cried Louise, her fair face flushing warmly.

"After marriage you may command, my angel, but before that blissful event comes off in due shape, permit me to remind you that I am master over all in this place," declared the outlaw, with almost Satanic emphasis underlying his surface politeness.

"Now, for my last words, all! I've pretty well prepared you for what is to come, so there is no use in further beating 'round the bush."

"I mean to marry Louise Gillespie, strictly according to the law. For that purpose I have induced your mutual friend, Judge Harvey, to pay this place a visit. When the proper time comes, he will perform the ceremony in legal fashion, and tie the knot too tightly for aught but death to undo."

"This will give me a legal claim upon the Sure Thing Lode, and when Jasper makes my loving sister his bride, we will control the Daisy Belle as well."

"Neither shall ever come to pass; I'll die first!"

"Both shall come to pass, or there will be other deaths than yours, young hot-head!" viciously retorted Major Hold-up, a warning hand pointing out the elder prisoner.

"If their children turn contrary, think what an all-powerful argument may be found in these venerable parents! And right there is where I mean to find it, too!" his surface calmness vanishing as by magic, and his voice fairly ringing with fierce determination.

"Refuse to accept the fate prepared for you, young folks, and your parents shall be put to the torture before your eyes! Inch by inch they shall suffer death, yet with their lives prolonged for days, weeks, even months if necessary!"

"Right there you have it, my good people. Think it over for the few hours of grace which we have concluded to grant you for that particular purpose. Make up your mind as to what is best and wisest for you to do, for when I come to you again, one word shall determine whether I greet you as wise friends, or crazy enemies."

"If the first, I'll pledge you good treatment and future reparation. If the last—but sufficient for the hour!"

"As he pronounced these final words, Major Hold-up brought forth some soft yet stout bands, and in spite of her feeble resistance and paying no heed to the fierce threats with which he was pelted by Jasper Howland, he bound the maiden's hands firmly behind her back, then placed her by the side of her father, after which he secured her ankles."

"It is now just about sunset in the outer world," Major Hold-up said, stepping back and viewing his handiwork approvingly. "I grant you a reprieve until morning, and that you may talk it over—see!"

He cut away the gag from each mouth, then took his sister by an arm and left the captives to themselves for the time being.

How would they improve this brief respite?

CHAPTER XXXV.

MILTON MULDRAW'S REWARD.

As might have been expected, excitement ran high when word of the Daisy Belle being successfully "jumped" by the Sure Thing crowd, under the immediate command of Milton Muldraw, reached Silverado; but when this much is said, pretty nearly the whole is told.

Although the sympathies of the town people were fairly divided between the right and the wrong of that Twin Lode affair, the unexplained absence of the Howlands, father and son, certainly had a dampening effect upon the ardor of the Daisy Belle adherents.

Fred Vincent did his level best to stir up justice for his side, but lacking any more visible authority than that assumed by himself, he met with very poor success.

Let either Abner or Jasper Howland make an appeal, and matters might be amended; but until then—

On his side, Milton Muldraw was anything but idle, and by assuming that his wildest fancies were well substantiated facts, he really won friends, in place of losing them, by his audacious claim-jumping.

Selecting only men in whom he could place implicit trust, he caused his view of the affair to be spread broadcast, and whenever complaint was made of the law being overridden by the

Sure Thing outfit, answer would instantly be made that the Howlands had set the ball to rolling through their abducting the Gillespies, father and daughter.

Taken all together it formed a very pretty state of affairs, and so long as the Twin Lodes hung in the balance, little else was of strong enough interest to command attention from Silverado.

As for Milton Muldraw, now chief center of interest for the public, he was fairly well satisfied with the way things were working, and would have been still more so could he have fully comprehended the quadruple disappearance of the evening preceding the capture of the Daisy Belle.

If Major Hold-up had in reality captured the Howlands and the Gillespies, where were they now, and what disposal did he mean to make of them in the end?

Had he taken them in hopes of extorting a rich ransom? If so, why had he not made his terms known before this!

True, it might not be so easy to determine whom that demand should be made upon, so far as the Howlands were concerned, but no such difficulty existed in the other case; of course the manager of the Sure Thing was the person to be addressed.

All this was helping to keep the brain of Milton Muldraw busy on the evening of the day following his capture of the Daisy Belle.

Time enough had elapsed for him to get matters to running smoothly at the Twin Lodes, and appointing Steinray as present manager of the Sure Thing, Muldraw took full charge of the Daisy, believing himself the best fitted for smoothing away any little roughnesses which might be caused there by the abrupt change of management.

He was here now, seated in the rude little office-building which formed one corner of that stout blockade, his chin clasped by his hands and elbows resting on the home-made desk at which Jasper Howland had kept their accounts.

So far everything had gone well with him and his bold schemes. He held full possession of the Twin Lodes, and in case their rightful owner should never return to claim them, who would have a better right to both claim and hold full possession?

And then, was it so strange, considering the nature and training of this man, that he really began to hope Major Hold-up, finding himself forestalled by a still more audacious brain and hand combined, might in his baffled rage actually sacrifice his now worthless prizes?

But, fate is capricious, and often turns the cold shoulder upon the very one who has been nearly smothered by the wealth of her favors; and so it was with Milton Muldraw right now.

While he was so busily reviewing his marvelous success in plans which, only one short week ago, he would have trembled to barely think of, retribution was surely if slowly drawing nigh, in the shape of sundry dark figures, the leading one of which was surely well acquainted with the immediate surroundings of the Daisy Belle.

Having reached the end of the stockade which came nearest to the hill-face into which the first drift of the mine had been driven, this guide paused, to softly whisper:

"Right hyar she am, boss! It's easy 'nough gittin' inside, but how 'bout gittin' out, ef thar's a gang o' lads on the watch?"

"You reported all quiet inside, didn't you?"

"Sure! But that was afore. Now—"

"Open the way and fall back, then. We'll do the rest, if you're losing your stock of sand, Norton."

There was a touch of contempt in this whispered command which served to sting the renegade miner, but he said nothing more until he had removed the hidden fastenings which held the secret door shut. Then, as this narrow opening grew visible to other eyes besides his own, he said in the same guarded tones which had been maintained through all:

"When my sand gives out, boss, mebbe you'll hev a grain or two to loan a pore devil, an' so—Ready, now?"

"Then you are going in, Dick?"

"Sure! Ef ary critter was to tackle us with a ax-ye who was which, what sort o' bluff could you give him? So, after me is manners!"

Luckily for their hopes, nothing of the sort hinted at took place.

All was dark there within the Daisy Belle stockade, and satisfied that no trouble was likely to arise, that night at least, Milton Muldraw had merely stationed one guard at the front post, giving all others permission to "bunk in," and even advising them to gain all the sleep they could, against a possible lack to come.

Silently as shadows the little party stole forward, led by Dick Norton, the same fellow who had so adroitly led Abner Howland into an ambushade, and who was now meditating the capture of the one who had "jumped" the Daisy Belle so promptly when opportunity offered.

Thanks to his perfect knowledge of the ground, and the precautions he had taken in advance, Dick Norton led his present masters to the office where Milton Muldraw was deep-buried in thought, and having showed them their game,

prudently drew back, ready to silence the armed guard in case any alarm should follow that attempted capture.

But, cool heads and strong hands were caring for the mine-manager, and when that silent signal came that all was in readiness, even the "sawed-off giant," with all his boasted muscle, proved helpless to break away from their grip.

Just as it had been on former occasions, a heavy muffler was flung about his head, and strong hands gripped his throat, effectually stifling the angry outcry which he attempted to make, and at the same time dragging him backward, putting him to a painful strain through his awkward position, which in a great degree neutralized his muscle.

Other hands swiftly tore away his belt of arms, and then bound his arms behind his back. After this was done, the rest was easy in comparison.

Less than five minutes sufficed to complete that capture, and then the dimly-burning candle was blown out, and the victors stood listening for sounds of the alarm having spread. But, nothing of the sort was to be heard, and presently Dick Norton came creeping back, to lend a helping hand in case it should be needed.

Between them they carried Muldraw from the office to the secret portal without arousing suspicion on the part of the guard in front; then, drawing him through the stockade they were quickly out of danger; so far as an alarm from the miners was concerned.

Not until then was a word spoken by either of the captors, or notice taken of Muldraw's sullen struggles to burst his bonds or slip his gag far enough to permit his giving a yell for aid; but now one of the bold trio removed that muffler from about the head of the prisoner, and addressed him:

"You have been flying high, Milton Muldraw, but your wings are about to be clipped, once for all! If a wise man you'd have respected the warning I gave you, in common with all the rest of mankind in this quarter of the globe; but, since you did not, the penalty be yours!"

Muldraw could see the masked head before him, and with a thrill of terror the like of which he had never felt before, he realized that Major Hold-up had shown his hand at last!

With this brief speech, the road-agent signed his fellows to work, and Muldraw was carried still further from the stockade, their next halt taking place when at the point where their horses had been left before stealing toward the stockade.

With very little care for his physical comfort, Milton Muldraw was swung across a saddle, face downward, then Major Hold-up mounted behind him, one hand steadying that awkward burden, the other guiding the horse.

The ride which followed was not of long duration, and when a halt was called again, Milton Muldraw instantly recognized the Gillespie residence, and the pine tree which stood in front.

He was left lying for several minutes upon the ground while the major busied himself with writing in bold letters upon a sheet of paper; but, struggle as he might, the captive could make no impression on his bonds, so well had that task been performed.

"As you have sinned, so must you suffer, Milton Muldraw," sternly spoke the road-agent, when his writing was finished. "You have dared play the usurper, now you must take the consequence!"

Stooping, the outlaw securely pinned that sheet of paper upon the doomed man's breast, then signed for his companions to bear a hand.

A rope was carefully adjusted, the prisoner was lifted to his feet, the slack was drawn in, and, with a united heave, they slowly but surely drew the doomed man from the ground!

Fastening the rope to the pine tree trunk, the avengers mounted their horses and rode rapidly away through the night.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOW TO FOIL MAJOR HOLD-UP.

SEVERAL hours of that brief respite granted by Major Hold-up had passed and perfect silence reigned among the prisoners who were confronted by such a difficult problem.

There had been considerable talking, however, before this silence fell over all, but little good had come of it.

The old hatred between Herman Gillespie and Abner Howland seemed to burn all the more fiercely now that their tongues had been set at liberty, and each one blamed the other for all the trouble which had come down upon them.

Neither Louise nor Jasper dared say very much, and even that little was powerless to clear away the clouds!

What could they do? How perfectly helpless they were to resist this unscrupulous schemer!

"I'd rather died a thousand times than to even think of—oh, papa! is there no way to escape such a dreadful alternative?"

"Defy him to the bitter end, if you are child of mine!" almost harshly commanded Herman Gillespie, his proud spirit yet unbroken.

"But, if he should—oh, how could I bear to see you tortured?"

"Better that than help him triumph so completely!" moodily muttered Jasper Howland.

"Oh, what a fool I was not to have done more when I had the chance! If I had only pleaded harder, perhaps—"

"I wish I had yielded when you asked me, Jasper!"

Then that silence fell over them all, and that neither Howland nor Gillespie broke forth in hot reprobation of the words uttered by their children, surely proved that they deemed what now confronted them was an even worse calamity than that elopement and marriage could have been.

Then, just when their gloomy dejection was deepest, a low voice came to their ears, and as they looked toward the dim entrance in surprise and suspense, a human figure crept into the clearer light, and a low ejaculation of glad surprise burst from Abner Howland's lips.

"Harvey! Set us free, man!"

"If I only might!" fairly groaned the newcomer, at the same time twisting himself around so that the light fell upon his back. "But, how can I set others free, when I can't do as much for myself?"

One and all caught his meaning on the instant, for now they could plainly see that the hands of Judge Harvey were tightly bound behind his back, with an additional double-hitch passing around his elbows.

"I managed to work off the bonds from my legs, thanks to the carelessness of my last guard, but the rest—no use!" muttered the judge, creeping closer, then pausing like one completely exhausted.

His coming, even in this comparatively helpless shape, naturally produced great excitement among the other prisoners, and questions flew fast for a time. Not until Harvey had explained the manner of his capture did that curiosity subside.

His story need not be repeated here, since it presented no incidents of pressing interest to the general reader. Enough that in this, as in all else, Major Hold-up had perfectly succeeded in carrying his point as marked out by himself.

Then came other words of still greater interest, however, for the man of law with poorly suppressed excitement and chagrin, told them the audacious excuse which Major Hold-up had given him for effecting his capture.

"If my hands had been at liberty, I would have mashed his mouth for so shamefully insulting me! But there I was, bound hand and foot, while he was playing with a mighty ugly-looking gun the while! Oh, confound the villain, and confusion overtake his vile schemes!"

Back to the minds of one and all flashed the words spoken by the road-agent. They had tried to doubt their full force until now, but with the judge before their eyes, how could they doubt longer?

"I'll kill you if you dare take part in such a devilish outrage, sir!" fiercely exploded Herman Gillespie. "My child—married to that devil in human shape? Why, I'd sooner see her joined to—I'd rather see her dead and in her grave!"

This was surely not the words he had started to utter, and Jasper Howland gave a partly smothered cry, at the same time lifting himself to a sitting posture, looking toward Louise, and her eyes were turned toward him, likewise!

Surely the same bewildering thought had occurred to them both!

"You'll murder me if I do; he'll kill me if I don't!" ejaculated Judge Harvey, in tones which surely would have provoked a laugh had the situation been less serious. "Well, since it seems I am fated to die, maybe I'd better perish as an honest man!"

"Why perish at all, sir?" asked Jasper, with a curious catch in his breath just then.

"Can you show us a safe way out, young gentleman?" tartly demanded the man of law, turning his face that way.

"I can suggest something by which your life can be saved, at least," more composedly declared young Howland, still gazing earnestly into the slowly-flushing face of his lady love. "Would Major Hold-up expect you to perform the marriage ceremony over one who was already married?"

"Eh? What—by the Law of Moses!" fairly spluttered the judge, glancing swiftly from face to face, then back to that of Jasper Howland.

"Do you really mean it, young man?"

"Will you give me permission to say more, Louise?" slowly, even tremblingly, asked the lover, only to be cut short by his father.

"What flea's biting you now, son? If you mean any such—"

"Easy, Howland!" sharply cut in the judge. "Wouldn't it be better for these two—loving each other as I know they surely do—to marry each other, than submit to such an abominable union as that devil of a major proposes?"

"You forget yourself, sir," stiffly spoke up Herman Gillespie. "I will not permit even you to make such allusion to my daughter, sir."

Judge Harvey gave a gesture of angry impatience at this, and bluntly blurted forth the query:

"Would you rather see me marry her to Hold-up, then? If so, I've too much respect for myself to have any further speech with you, sir!"

And, by the Lord that made me, sir! if the young lady will—eh, Louise?"

Hardly the most coherent speech imaginable, but after that loving, imploring look from the eyes of Jasper Howland, the maiden was at no loss for an interpretation.

"If father—oh, papa! say that we may!"

"And take plenty of time to think it all over, Gillespie," interjected the judge, himself excited at the vision which was opening before him. "Of two evils always choose the least! And I don't mean exactly that, neither!"

"The case stands like this, Mr. Gillespie," said Jasper, steadying his nerves by a desperate effort. "There is only one method by which Major Hold-up can be foiled, and disagreeable as you may find the alternative, surely that will be better for your daughter?"

"And for you, why not say?" sneered Gillespie.

"I don't count, sir. If I can save Louise from worse than death—and that is what a union with that demon surely will prove—my own life counts as less than nothing."

"And if you are still so stubborn as to cling to a mere prejudice to the everlasting misery of your daughter, sir, I'll—I'll marry her to Jasper Howland in spite of your teeth, sir!"

"I'll never disobey you so flatly, papa, but if you— It would surely kill me to wed that awful creature!"

Sobbing as though her heart was breaking, Louise fell forward with her face in the lap of her parent, and Judge Harvey once more took up the thread.

"There is no other way out of it, Gillespie, and surely you will not withhold your consent when— If you do, blessed if I don't marry her to the major, tight as words and legal forms can do the job!"

"You surely wouldn't do that, Harvey?"

"Why not? If you care so mighty little about saving your child, why should I sacrifice my own life for that same end? And, too, only to have another man brought out here to do the job I'd given a life to avoid!"

"Consent, Mr. Gillespie, and you, father," gravely. "Do this in order to save Louise, and I pledge you my word of honor that I will consent to a divorce the very day our liberty is gained—if you make that demand upon me!"

"But, would even such a sacrifice save her?" hesitated Gillespie. "Surely such a devil would not hesitate in murdering you, to make her a widow! And then—what is it, Louise?"

A soft, eager whisper filled his ear for a few seconds, and then, as though won over against his will, Herman Gillespie turned to Abner Howland, saying:

"You have heard all, Mr. Howland. What is your advice?"

"I haven't any to offer. Go on as you see fit, and never bother any of your heads over me!" came the cold answer.

It may have been this show of disgust at such a union that helped Herman Gillespie to yield to the pleadings of his daughter, or he may have been convinced by the arguments with which Judge Harvey pelted him during the next few minutes; but let that be as it may, a consent at length came through his lips, and despite their hampered condition, a warm, clinging kiss from the lips of his child gave him his first thanks.

It was an odd marriage, to be sure! Not a hand was free, and only Judge Harvey was able to walk. But it is pretty safe to say that two happier mortals never drew the breath of life than were Louise Gillespie and Jasper Howland, when the final words were spoken which united them as man and wife!

Then Judge Harvey crept away to resume his former station.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN INTERRUPTED CEREMONY.

BEFORE the end of that respite came, and with it Major Hold-up to receive his final answer, their wisest course of action had been pretty thoroughly discussed by the four prisoners.

If no other end had been reached, still that necessity for talking with each other would not have been time spent in vain, since it certainly lessened the powerful dislike which had for so long existed between the elder Howland and Gillespie, by giving them another to hate even more savagely.

Mainly through the arguments of the newly wedded couple, it was at length decided to keep their important secret as long as possible, only divulging the fact of a prior marriage when nothing less would save them from undergoing another ceremony with Major Hold-up and sister.

There was a chance for rescue by some of their friends, if not of Silverado, then by Sweepstakes Sam and his pard. Since they had sworn to "camp on the trail of Major Hold-up," there surely was a chance of help coming from that quarter.

Another thing: now that she had been united to her loved one, with the consent of her father, Louise seemed almost another person, and her fears had vanished—whither?

Yet the young people behaved very nicely, all

things considered, and instead of trying to desert father for bridegroom, Louise clung even closer to her parent, and to him her kisses were given, into his ears her low, happy gratitude was breathed.

Time passed on, and with the coming of a new day, Major Hold-up came to receive his answer.

It seemed to be all he could ask for, although both Gillespie and Abner Howland made a fair show of cursing him should he attempt to gain his evil ends through such abominable coercion.

Precious little the doughty road-agent cared for this! He noticed only the fact that neither of those most intimately concerned showed worse symptoms than sullen silence and sobbing terror.

"I'll guarantee to brighten you up long before another four-and-twenty hours can roll by," he declared, with a hearty humor which told plainly enough how delighted he was with the way things in general were working. "As for you ancient growlers, it's time you took a step to the background anyway, and this seems just the right day for giving you your first lesson."

Evidently Major Hold-up had come fully prepared at all points, for as he ceased speaking, he clapped his hands sharply, and four masks came into the chamber, silently saluting, then waiting for instructions.

"Remove these gentlemen," commanded Major Hold-up, with a gesture toward Herman Gillespie and Abner Howland. "You know what to do with them: *do it*, then!"

Acting so promptly that none of the quartette had a chance to remonstrate or to ask a question, two fellows caught up each of the persons indicated, then hurried away with them through the darkness.

Both of the luckless mine-owners felt fairly well assured that all was lost so far as their own lives were concerned. Major Hold-up surely intended removing such inconvenient stumbling-blocks from his path.

"By butchering us, he'll know that he's marrying the true heirs!"

"Will he, though?" exploded Abner Howland, in a far less lugubrious tone. "I'm not dead yet, and—"

"Augh! give us a rest!" came in a disgusted snort from one of the four masked varlets, and Howland instantly recognized the voice of Dick Norton, the same fellow who had so shamefully betrayed him into the power of the road-agent.

Hot curses flew at the rascal, but Norton seemed proof against any such missiles. He and his mates forced gags into place, then left the pair of captives to their own dark thoughts and fears.

After what seemed hours of trying suspense there in utter darkness, a light gradually made itself perceptible to their straining eyes, and then a strange, thrilling drama was bit by bit unfolded before them.

Before them lay a goodly sized section of that cavern, now being lighted up with candles which masked men were placing in position; and having performed this duty to their own satisfaction, the varlets passed off the rude stage, giving place to other actors in whom those helpless witnesses felt a burning interest.

First there came Jasper Howland in company with the sister of Major Hold-up; the first with drooping head and downcast eyes, the other stepping like a victress, although her face was still hidden behind a far from becoming mask.

Shortly afterward there appeared Judge Harvey, his limbs at liberty, but his demeanor that of one who feels far from certain just what his reward is going to be for services rendered.

A few minutes passed by without any further arrivals. The interval was spent by the bride elect in whispering to her companion, seemingly as willing as able to talk for them both!

Both Gillespie and Howland uttered a muffled sound as they saw Major Hold-up appear in sight with one arm supporting the drooping figure of Louise, the maiden looking as though on the verge of swooning away, until she caught sight of Jasper; then she straightened up and appeared to nerve herself for the trial yet to come.

All this was taken note of by those two helpless witnesses, with what degree of interest may possibly be imagined, but which defies description.

From the sounds which came to their ears, each knew the other was desperately wrestling with his bonds, vainly hoping to slip or break them in time to rush forward and share the fate which that baffled villain might in his mad rage inflict upon the younger couple.

Major Hold-up appeared to be in high spirits over the near culmination of his daring schemes, and his voice sounded almost genial as he addressed Judge Harvey, with the words:

"All ready, my dear sir? Consider the fiery impatience of ardent lovers, and don't hold us in suspense longer than absolutely obliged."

"Sir," began the man of law, clearing his throat with stern emphasis, "I demand the right to state, for the benefit of these young people as well as for my own honor, that I have vainly protested against any such proceedings! I am not a willing instrument—"

"Steady, judge!" warningly interrupted the

road-agent, his voice growing cold and hard as he added: "I am not very well versed in the crooks and quirks of the law, but if you think to cause trouble in the time to come for me, by calling these young people, as you term Miss Gillespie and Mr. Howland, as witnesses to your enforced ministrations, I'll simply state right now that it will never work!"

"In still plainer words, you've got to make this a strictly legal ceremony, strong enough to defy breaking, tight enough to hold water, or you will never see the light of the sun again!"

Judge Harvey listened to these threats without a change of countenance, and when Major Hold-up ceased speaking, he quietly added:

"If I perform the ceremony at all, sir, it will be legally and in strict conformance with the law."

"If, you say?"

"Precisely, sir. If the parties most nearly concerned refuse to submit, I have neither the power nor the will to coerce them."

Major Hold-up gave a short, hard laugh at this, yet it was with evident relief that he drew Louise's hand a bit further through his arm, at the same time motioning to his sister.

At her touch Jasper Howland moved forward, pausing only a few feet from where Louise was now standing.

Both faces were unusually pale, but beyond that neither betrayed fear or indecision. Evidently they had braced themselves for the crisis which was now so close at hand.

"We are waiting on your movements, Judge Harvey," said Major Hold-up, with a low, mocking bow toward the man of law. "Will you kindly put us out of our misery as quickly as possible?"

The judge glanced slowly from face to face, his own turned grave and impassible as though he had suddenly donned a marble mask. Then he spoke, slowly, clearly:

"Before we can go any further, ladies and gentlemen, it becomes my duty to ask if any one of you four contracting parties know of any impediment to this proposed ceremony? If so, now is the time to make it known, Miss Gillespie?"

"There is an impediment, sir," distinctly answered Louise.

"There is *not*!" fiercely cried Major Hold-up.

"There *is*," repeated Louise, freeing her hand with a swift jerk. "This farce must go no further, for I am already a married woman!"

"And I am her husband!" cried Jasper Howland, breaking away from the masked woman, to clasp Louise in his arms, springing back with her clinging to his breast, facing their enemies with desperate courage.

It seemed as though Major Hold-up had been stricken speechless by this strange interruption, coming as it did when everything appeared to be progressing so favorably; but then a hoarse cry broke from his lips as he clutched a revolver—only to wheel right about, in answer to a wild, thrilling alarm just then making itself heard toward the cave-entrance!

"Help! Boss! Devil's broke loose!" came a hoarse yell, then the swift rattle of firearms!

"To the front!" cried Major Hold-up, dashing off in that direction, closely followed by his sister, who likewise drew a pistol from her girdle.

And then, after a hot but brief-lived and unseen struggle, two forms came rushing into that lighted chamber, to utter a glad cry of recognition. And those forms belonged to Sweepstakes Sam and his pard, Mack Wilson.

"Good enough! Where's the old gentlemen, to make a clean sweep!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TWIN LODS UNITED.

EVEN as those words escaped the Silver Sport, Louise uttered a sobbing cry, and as though guided by instinct she sprang back to where Herman Gillespie and Abner Howland were trying their level best to either burst their bonds or to attract attention their way.

But before she could set them free, Sweepstakes Sam and his pard followed with a light, and almost sternly put a stop to her efforts.

"You are safe, of course, gentlemen," said Sweepstakes Sam by way of a beginning. "You shall be set at liberty, equally of course, but not until my pard, here, has claimed his full reward."

Singleton drew a knife and cut away the gags, thus giving the astonished mine-owners the use of their tongues once more. And Abner Howland was the first to improve that opportunity.

"Is it another bluff for the Daisy Belle?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear sir," declared the Silver Sport, with a wry grimace. "We've heard the changes rung on the Sure Thing and the Daisy Belle until we've grown most heartily sick and tired of the mere sound of those words!"

"Then what in—"

"Pray hear our friend through, father," pleaded Jasper. "Remember how nobly these gentlemen came to our rescue just as all hope seemed gone! We surely owe them that much courtesy!"

"We are receiving so much courtesy at their hands!" sarcastically chipped in Herman Gillespie.

"For my sake, dear father!" murmured Louise, in her turn.

"Surely it is not so much to ask, gentleman," Singleton gravely added. "All we *do* ask is this: Major Hold-up—"

"Where is that infernal rascal, then?"

"Dead!" announced Mack Wilson, stepping forward. "I swore to never leave his trail until his crimes were fully expiated by his death. I killed him, as I vowed above the grave of my sister!"

"And this is all we ask, gentlemen," hurriedly supplemented the Silver Sport. "Simply for you to remain quietly in here, with your children and Judge Harvey for company, until we can remove all traces of our just vengeance."

"Surely you are not ashamed of your work, sir?"

"No, Mr. Gillespie, but my pardner has reasons of his own which makes him dislike the very idea of such idle chatter as we would be subjected to in case the dead were exposed to public view. Give us the simple pledge we ask, and then, when we have safely removed our dead, you can talk all you see fit. Is this too much for us to ask, then?"

"And Major Hold-up and his sister? They are really dead?" persisted Abner Howland, who seemed to scent some sort of deception underlying this strange proposal.

"Can you take the solemn oath of your own son, sir?"

"Of course I can!"

"Then you shall have *his* testimony, Mr. Howland. Until he returns, you will please remain as you are. Neither of these friends will set you at liberty until Jasper returns?"

Both Louise and Judge Harvey promptly gave their promise to that effect, and laying a hand on Jasper's arm, Sam moved away, following the lead of his pard, Mack Wilson.

No sooner were the three young men at a safe distance beyond ear-shot of the still mystified mine-owners, than Sweepstakes Sam burst into a low and hearty laugh, while Jasper Howland grasped a hand of each, shaking them most vigorously, but with his voice unable to express the ardent thanks his tear-dimmed eyes were looking.

"Just consider it all said, pardner, and we'll be able to let you go back to your charming bride all the sooner," said Singleton, in a gay, off-hand manner. "Ah, pardner! you're in great good luck right there! And—do you know? I was awfully tempted to cheat you out of your richest treasure—a treasure worth a thousand fold all you can ever hope to wrest from the Twin Lodes!"

Although Singleton spoke in a jesting tone, there was an underlying current of earnest truth in these words, but Jasper Howland was far too happy just then to feel even the slightest trace of jealousy.

"All of which I owe to you, gentlemen," he said, in broken tones, his eyes showing moister than ever as he once more pressed their hands in his. "May Heaven reward you both, for I'll never be able to do so. Why, I can't even give you thanks fit—"

"Let thanks wait until we ask for them, pardner, please. Don't forget how you saved me from Rustling Tom, that night, old fellow! I would have lost my life then, only for you."

"Well, that shot of yours, followed by a bit of a glimpse I happened to catch of you and Miss Gillespie among the rocks, gave me an idea of how I might square my little debt to you. And so—right here you have it, pardner!"

This was but the beginning of a long clearing-up talk, a literal transcript of which would require far too much space at this late hour.

Yet something of what was then revealed, ought to be given the reader, to clear away the few points which may still seem obscure.

It will be remembered, perhaps, that the "secret of the grave" there at the hastily-deserted camp of the road-agents, was not discovered by the two pards until they had essayed to drag the dead road-agent from his rude resting-place, for the purpose of searching his body for a possible clue to Major Hold-up.

The clue lay in the same grave, for underneath the first body lay another!

This was instantly recognized by Mack Wilson. It was all that remained of his hated enemy.

A bullet-hole directly over his heart told how death had come to the sinner, and thus fully justified the firm belief Mack Wilson had expressed when first rallying from his wounds: he had indeed slain his game!

With the death of Major Hold-up, the real mission of the two pards to Silverado was completed, but Sweepstakes Sam had seen how contrary the stream of love was flowing for Jasper Howland, and feeling sincerely grateful to that young man for having saved him from the knife of Rustling Tom, he coaxed Mack Wilson into playing an odd, mystified game.

Sweepstakes Sam it was who wrote those notices signed Major Hold-up, mainly for the purpose of giving them a fair excuse for going and coming at will; and before they rode out of town, Jasper Howland had been given the neces-

sary cue, and knew in the rough just what the pards proposed doing in his and Louise's behalf. Jasper easily won over faithful Dick Norton to play a part in the little comedy, and right well that worthy served the lovers.

Acting as Major Hold-up through all, Sweepstakes Sam, aided by his pard, brought all the rest to pass, even to punishing Milton Muldraw.

He laughed heartily enough as he came to that incident. Much as the unfaithful mine-manager deserved punishment, his reward also had a touch of the grotesque rather than the tragic in it.

"We just hitched the noose around his body, and strung him up for the night," declared Sweepstakes Sam. "Of course the first one who happened to sight him in the morning, cut him down; but I imagine he'll prove a bit easier to manage when you go back. If not, just hint at another business call from Major Hold-up!"

Of course Judge Harvey had played a willing part in converting the too obstinate fathers, but that was not to be revealed until all wounds had healed over. Nor were the real facts to be laid bare until time had fully reconciled the two mine-owners to the union of their children.

This necessity it was which made the pards play this final bit of mystification, and it may be said here that their best hopes were realized far more quickly than they dared hope for.

With all points finally cleared up, the two pards bade Jasper Howland farewell, and then took their departure, after solemnly promising to pay another visit to Silverado as soon as they received word that the old feud had been forever buried, and that the families of Howland and Gillespie had been firmly united, as well as the Twin Lodes.

All this actually came to pass in due course of time, and no effort was made to penetrate the mystery which still hung about Major Hold-up and his feud with Mack Wilson.

There was no difficulty experienced in regaining full possession of the Twin Lodes, and Milton Muldraw was discharged as manager of the Sure Thing. He, himself, had certainly found out the truth of the old saying among sporting men, that "there's nothing so uncertain as a dead sure thing!"

For a few weeks there was an awkward restraint in the manner of the two mine-owners, but this wore away after Louise had for a while practiced her loving arts on Abner Howland. And at pretty much the same time Herman Gillespie began to realize the truth; that he might very easily have been given a worse son-in-law.

After the first admission, all came around smoothly enough, and when the true story of the cave ceremony was told them, Abner and Herman actually laughed over it, and that with heartily gripping hands!

Then word was sent to the two pards, and when they came in answer to that message, Sweepstakes Sam brought with him a fair young bride!

THE END.

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